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THE NIHILISTIC EGOIST MAX STIRNER

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CONTENTS

page

Introduction vii

PART ONE: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Chapter I: 'Max Stirner' 3
Chapter II: The Matrix of the Nihilist 20
Chapter III: The Descent into the Vacuum 46
Chapter IV: *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* 61

PART TWO: ADVERSARIES AND SUCCESSORS

Chapter V: Stirner and the Origins of Marxism 101
Chapter VI: Stirner and the Anarchists 126
Chapter VII: Stirner and Nietzsche 145
Chapter VIII: Stirner and Existentialism 162

PART THREE: NIHILISTIC EGOISM

Chapter IX: Total Atheism 191
Chapter X: The Nihilist 226
Chapter XI: The Egoist 252
Chapter XII: Philosophy as Play 286

Conclusion 311
Bibliography 319
Index 321

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INTRODUCTION

To most students of the history of philosophy the name of Max Stirner is one of those names which sound vaguely familiar but which do not call forth any clearly defined figure. It may produce distant echoes of long-forgotten internecine squabbles among the followers of the dead Hegel; it may evoke reminiscences of Marx; or it may conjure up the shades of nineteenth-century patriarchs of anarchism: but the figure of Stirner himself is one on which it is curiously rare to focus. Scholars are mostly content to recollect him, if they recollect him at all, by his associations, the tacit assumption being that it is only through these associations that he has any historical significance or contemporary interest. Evidently, the present book is based on the opposite assumption. I write on the assumption that the philosophy of Stirner is intrinsically significant, that it has been mistakenly undervalued and neglected, and that it is worthy of serious and continuing consideration in its own terms.

Stirner's name occurs frequently enough in works on nihilism, anarchism, or on the origins of Marxism, and in histories of philosophy, particularly histories of German philosophy. In general works of these types, however, he seldom earns more than a scant reference, a jejune footnote, or a few trite lines reciting the stock categories to which he is by agreement consigned. The scattered articles and essays on his ideas by miscellaneous English and American writers tend to be poorly informed, partisan, and ephemeral in character, and the present work is in fact the first full-scale presentation of Stirner's philosophy in English, although more than a century has elapsed since his death. In this time several German and French historians of ideas have published critical expositions of his work, and there exists a larger volume of slighter literature, mainly in German, French, and Italian. During

the last forty years, however, very little scholarly attention has been paid to him. I shall maintain that nearly all of the earlier literature on Stirner has been in large measure vitiated by a basic misunderstanding of his place in the history of philosophy, and that only with the rise of existentialist philosophies in Europe during the last forty years has it been possible to undertake an illuminating appraisal of his true contribution to the development of European thought.

Thus, whatever value the present work may have as a disinterested project in philosophical archaeology, another reason for disinterring and reconstructing Stirner's philosophical system is its peculiar relevance to one of the most vital and formative intellectual movements of recent times, the philosophical movement generally referred to as 'Existentialism'. To describe Stirner as a 'pre-existentialist' thinker would admittedly be misleading, and in any case not very informative. In terms of conscious history he of course belongs to a different tradition, and his orientation within the existentialist frame of reference, although indisputable, is by no means easy to specify. Yet his moral and metaphysical moorage, whatever may be its exact location, has clear bearings within the existentialist world-view, even if it must eventually be defined in opposition to most 'existential' standpoints. The contours of Stirner's universe are recognizably those of the universe charted by the existentialists. Without him, the metaphysical cartography of existentialism is deficient, for the philosophical position he occupies is in fact one of the landmarks noted by existentialists in negotiating their critical passage. I shall argue that, while Stirner's philosophy is a systematic refusal of all the typical existentialist solutions, it is a refusal delivered in face of the same alternatives and fraught with the same issues as those which the existentialist summons us to confront, and that his nihilistic response to what he sees as his metaphysical situation is therefore one which existentialists are bound in turn to answer.

For similar reasons, Stirner has an even more urgent relevance to a still wider audience. If the writings of existentialists strike a deep chord in the European consciousness, this is above all because they offer an analysis of the alienated condition of con-

temporary man, of his rootlessness, his isolation, his sense of spiritual dispossession. The existentialists have been speaking to the times, inasmuch as they have identified a phenomenon which is not confined to any one sphere of human activity, but which has infected humanity at its centre and has spread to every phase of modern life, to our social and political life, to our personal relations, our intellectual concerns, and to literature and the arts. Wherever and in whatever form it appears, human estrangement and its products can be attributed to an original and basic denial. For the existentialist, this is essentially a denial of any objective meaning or intrinsic value to human experience. For the moralist, it appears to be a denial of all ideals and principles of conduct. For the theologian, it represents yet another—perhaps the ultimate—denial of God. Whatever form it may take, it is this denial of significance at the heart of things which has come to excite the anxious or fascinated attention of poets, dramatists, novelists, and artists as well as of educators, sociologists, and the other cultural diagnosticians of our time. Now, in the aetiology of nihilism Stirner's case-history stands unique. His one great book, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, must be the only sustained attempt to present a philosophy of unsparing nihilism systematically and without reserve. Stirner's candour is absolute. He intends to make no concessions and to give no quarter, but to stand as the avowed representative of the most extreme dimension of nihilism to which logic can carry him. For Stirner, this is the nihilism of the nihilistic *egoist*. Resting as it does on an ontology of negation, in which vacuity, purposelessness, and disintegration are the constitutive concepts, his total egoism is essentially grounded in a world-view which is starkly nihilistic and which provides the critic, therefore, with an unprecedented opportunity to study the metaphysical structure of a nihilistic system formulated in the unabashed first person with classical directness and lucidity. This is probably Stirner's principal claim to renewed consideration. The figure of the nihilistic egoist has been lapidated by philosophers from Plato to Marcel; his character has been imaginatively portrayed by novelists as contrasted as Balzac and Gide; seldom if ever, however, has he been allowed to speak for himself.

If his world-outlook is to be appraised, the nihilistic egoist must come forward in his own person to be scrutinized at first hand. Whatever his merits as a metaphysician, Stirner's lasting significance is that, with unparalleled self-display, he offers us an intimate, circumstantial, and unexpurgated view of the workings of the nihilistic mind.

Since Stirner is so little known to English readers, and since the background of his ideas is important for an understanding of the forms in which he cast them, I shall devote the whole of the first Part of this book to a straightforward documentary presentation of the main outlines of his life and character, the operative influences of his time, the evolution of his distinctive concepts, and their culminating expression in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*.[1] His entire philosophy is centred on the concept of 'self-possession',[2] to be understood in its most literal sense as the self-love and self-assertion of the particular historical human being who was Max Stirner. Although his personality is not an engaging one, therefore, it is indissolubly fused with the substance and meaning of his philosophy. The substance of his message is not so affected by the intellectual fabric of the age in which he wrote, for he is essentially occupied in restating a truly perennial philosophical position, but the conceptual apparatus with which he worked was mainly supplied by the conceptual artificers of his day, and some discussion of the intellectual milieu in which his

[1] Literally, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* means *The Unique One and his Property*. The only existing English translation of Stirner's book bears the title, *The Ego and His Own*, which is both infelicitous and inaccurate. Since English readers who already know the book know it under that title, however, I shall not attempt to substitute a more accurate rendering but instead shall simply refer to the book throughout by its German title. In any case, the title of the book in itself conveys little, since the distinctive force of concepts like 'The Unique One' can only be fully rendered by a thorough analysis of the parts they play in Stirner's system.

[2] The German word is 'Eigenheit', which customarily means 'distinctiveness', 'peculiarity', or even 'idiosyncrasy'. However, it is intimately connected with the German words for selfishness, self-interest, appropriation and property, and as Stirner uses the term it connotes The Unique One's quality of concentrating on his own interests alone, of being his own master, of being true to and 'owning' himself. The word used by Byington, Stirner's translator, is 'ownness'. I have preferred 'self-possession'.

ideas germinated is accordingly necessary if we are to distinguish between the philosophical equipment which he acquired ready-made from the contemporary philosophical workshops and the motive impulse which he himself supplied. Some account must also be given of the process by which Stirner moved from a somewhat nebulous form of ethical individualism to the total egocentricity which was his ultimate metaphysical resting-place, for the route along which he moved step by inevitable step represents, it might be claimed, the itinerary which every form of dissident personalism is logically fated to follow. Finally in this Part I shall attempt to give a comprehensive and neutral exposition of Stirner's characteristic perspective, relying wholly on his own terminology and indeed as far as possible on his actual words in *Der Einzige*, since few English readers can be expected to have a direct acquaintance with the contents of his book.[1]

Having examined the design and motive principles of his system, I shall go on in Part Two to assess Stirner's place in the history of ideas, by studying some critical turbulences in the main currents of thought to which he is generally regarded as having contributed. The points at which the philosophy of *Der Einzige* entered the main streams of European thought are hard to locate, however, and it would be idle to claim that its author exerted a subsequent influence comparable to that of such contemporaries as Kierkegaard or Schopenhauer. His overt role, even within the deviant lineages by which he is acknowledged, has been a peripheral one, while his latent and indirect influence, although surmisably much greater, is too diffuse and spasmodic to be precisely gauged. I shall argue that although, by an early misconception, Stirner has traditionally been consigned to an ornamental niche amid the embalmed ancestors of modern anarchism, in terms of actual historic effectiveness his place, albeit still an incongruous one, is rather among the virulent philo-

[1] The only English translation, *The Ego and His Own*, by Steven T. Byington, was first published in 1907, in the U.S.A. After being out of print for many years, this translation was reissued by the Libertarian Book Club (New York) in 1963, edited, with a new Introduction, by James J. Martin.

sophical controversialists from whose shrill clashes there emerged the sonorous figure of Karl Marx. Yet the cathartic encounter of Marx and Stirner was no more than a stage (however crucial *as* a stage) in the early history of Marxism. As an intellectual manifesto, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* stands much nearer to *Beyond Good and Evil* than to *Capital*, and despite its origins in the literature of Young Hegelianism, viewed from the vantage-point of a century later it can be seen to belong ultimately to the philosophical galaxy of which Nietzsche was the rising star. As I shall show, however, if Stirner was more than merely an adversary of Marx, he was much more than merely a precursor of Nietzsche. More surely than Nietzsche, he anticipated (and indeed embodied) those typical modern forms of the nihilistic mentality against which, by a process of repulsion, existentialist writers in the twentieth century have sought to construct and define their image of creative man. The points of contact between Stirner and a thinker like Sartre are many and explosive. I shall spend considerable time, therefore, in investigating the fundamental ambivalence in existentialism, for the monster from which existentialists fearfully recoil and which they are simultaneously drawn to embrace, the monster of nihilism, assuredly found in Stirner its most complete avatar.

The third and last Part of the book will be devoted to a critical study of Stirner's form of nihilistic egoism, viewed without prejudice as an attempt to state this particular philosophical position coherently and definitively. One of Stirner's prime concerns, for example, was to explore the implications of a thoroughgoing religious disbelief, and I shall therefore examine the ways in which *Der Einzige* claims to make a unique contribution to the development and self-understanding of radical atheism, since a genuinely total atheism, according to Stirner, will find itself to be indistinguishable from the nihilism of the nihilistic egoist. If the truth of nihilism is to be affirmed existentially, however, it is not enough for the nihilist to give it his merely passive and abstract mental assent; this nihilistic truth is affirmed existentially only when it is actively chosen by the nihilist, when it is personally appropriated by him as the truth

within which he henceforth resolves to live; and thus it will be necessary for us to examine the concrete personal terms on which, in contrast with the existentialists, Stirner professes to carry out his resolve to will and live the nihilistic truth which he has chosen to confront. This resolve is personified in the figure of the nihilistic egoist, The Unique One. I shall therefore go on to evaluate Stirner's portrayal of the total egoist—his metaphysical solitude, his coldly exploitive relationships to others, his amoralism, and the acts of egoistic appropriation by which he realizes his distinctive mode of being-in-the-world. Finally, I shall seek to interpret certain key propositions of *Der Einzige* in which, I believe, its author is adumbrating a conception of the nature of his own metaphysical activity which is memorable both for its striking integration with the rest of his theory of knowledge and for its intrinsic pertinence in an age when the nature and epistemological status of metaphysics are the subjects of widespread dispute.

Naturally, I hope one result of writing this book will be that more people are induced to reconsider Stirner's contribution to European thought, and that in consequence more light will be shed on one of the darker corners of the moral universe. I would be the last person to claim that Stirner ranks among the great philosophers of modern times. But he had the courage to take up one of the boundary-positions in philosophy, and the articulacy to depict this position without residue of ambiguity. Many will feel that, like the Inchcape Bell, his accents announce a sinister reef at all costs to be avoided, but surely no one will gainsay that the warning-bell is often an irreplaceable aid to navigation. If we are concerned to interpret human experience, then, and to compose our response to it, we shall have to take account of all the crucial dimensions of experience, including the dimension of estrangement, and an evaluation of Stirner's predicament, as that of a philosopher who entered and sought to make his home in this dimension, is in that case an intellectual obligation which we cannot shirk.

PART ONE

The Man and His Work

CHAPTER I

'MAX STIRNER'

THE known facts of Stirner's life are agreed but sparse. When the enthusiasm of his devoted biographer, John Henry Mackay, was first kindled by a reference in Lange's *History of Materialism*, the philosopher had already been dead for over thirty years. Mackay's tireless researches during the closing decade of last century yielded somewhat meagre results, for not only was he writing after a lapse of time in which the very name of Stirner had been all but forgotten, but his research was in addition from the start hampered by the enigmatic character of its elusive subject, who in his life had been self-absorbed and reticent almost to the point of complete withdrawal. Nevertheless, the massive labours of Mackay at least salvaged sufficient information to enable us to reconstruct the essential outlines of Stirner's career and to afford us a revealing, if tantalizing, glimpse of his personality.[1]

'Max Stirner' was born Johann Caspar Schmidt on 25 October 1806, in a prosperous house overlooking the Marktplatz in Bayreuth. The boyhood sobriquet of 'Stirner', given to him on account of his unusually broad forehead, later served him first as a literary pseudonym and then as the name by which he preferred to be generally known. The Schmidts, Albert Christian Heinrich and Sophia Elenora, were an unpretentious lower-middle-class couple, of the Evangelical Lutheran denomination. The times were troubled, for Germany was in turmoil and large tracts of the country had been laid waste by the Napoleonic campaigns. Although Bayreuth itself escaped the worst excesses, the town knew three rulers, Prussian, French, and Bavarian, in as many

[1] The following account is principally indebted to Mackay's definitive *Max Stirner: sein Leben und sein Werk*, Berlin, 1898; 2nd ed., 1910; 3rd ed., Leipzig, 1914. Mackay, despite his name a German, and a poet of some repute, spent nearly thirty years in his *Stirnerforschung*.

years, and it is perhaps surprising that Albert Schmidt was able to earn a peaceful and comfortable living as a flute-maker. The couple had been married a year when their first and only child was born. Six months later Albert Schmidt died suddenly from a haemorrhage.

Stirner was not yet three when his mother remarried. Her new husband, Heinrich Friedrich Ludwig Ballerstedt, had the opportunity to take over an apothecary's business and shortly after their marriage the pair left Bayreuth for Culm on the Vistula, where a daughter, Johanna Friederica, was born to them soon after their arrival in December 1809. Stirner was fetched from Bayreuth early in 1810, and it was therefore in East Prussia that he spent his early boyhood, most of it as an only child, as his young halfsister died in September 1812. Little or nothing is known about the young boy's character and interests. In 1818, however, his parents sent their twelve-year old son back to Bayreuth to continue his education, living with his father's elder sister, Anna Marie, and his godfather, Johann Caspar Martin Sticht, who were themselves childless, and attending the noted classical Gymnasium of the city, where for seven years from 1819 he appears to have been a capable and industrious pupil. Contriving generally to gain a place among the first six of his class, he passed his Leaving Examination in third place out of twenty-five and in 1826 was granted a Leaving Certificate of the first rank, with the commendation 'very worthy'.

In the autumn of the same year Stirner matriculated in the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Berlin, where for the next two years he diligently attended lectures during some twenty-two hours each week. His wide studies included logic, Greek literature, and geography; among his lecturers were Neander (later arch-enemy of the notorious Strauss) on ecclesiastical history and Christian antiquity, and Marheineke (then a prominent member of the Hegelian Right) on dogmatics, Church symbolism, and recent philosophical theology; he heard Schleiermacher lecture on ethics; and he listened to the great Hegel himself, as the oracle pronounced on the history of philosophy, philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of spirit.

From Berlin, in accordance with custom, Stirner moved on to two other German universities with the intention of continuing his higher education. In 1828 be went to Erlangen, where he followed courses in divinity, logic, and metaphysics, and in November 1829 he entered the University of Königsberg. During the next three years, however, there occurs a mysterious interruption of Stirner's academic career. He attended no lectures at Königsberg. In 1830 he seems to have spent six months at home in Culm, and in 1831, although still nominally a student of Königsberg, he was compelled to devote another year to 'family affairs', the nature of which must be conjectural, but which may have arisen from his mother's increasing mental instability. He officially claimed to have pursued his studies privately during this period. Certainly, in November 1832 he reappeared in Berlin, determined to conclude his education and qualify as a teacher.

There were setbacks still to come. He fell ill, and as a result was forced to neglect several courses of lectures in order to prepare for his examinations in the time remaining. In the midst of his preparations his mother, now incurably deranged, arrived in Berlin and had to be made an inmate of Die Charité hospital. Although he formally completed his studies in March 1834, it was late November before he was able to submit the written tasks demanded of him by his examiners,[1] before whom he presented himself for examination in the five subjects he proposed to teach in the upper forms of the Gymnasium—classics, German, history, philosophy, and religion—as well as in 'the remaining subjects' for the lower forms. He had undertaken too much: after his oral examination in April 1835, his examiners reported him lacking in precise information except where biblical knowledge was concerned. One of them, Trendelenburg, found that the candidate's 'speculative ability' was not equalled by his knowledge of the history of philosophy, and that the influence of 'the most recent

[1] Stirner had to submit two 'written tasks': the first, a Latin translation, with detailed grammatical and exegetical commentary, of a fairly lengthy section of Thucydides; the second, a dissertation 'On School Rules', first published in *Neue Beiträge zur Stirner-Forschung*, ed. R. Engert, Dresden, 1921. This dissertation treats of school discipline from a highly abstract, quasi-Hegelian standpoint, and is Stirner's earliest extant philosophical writing.

philosophy' was not to be discerned in his writings. Following this judgment, Stirner was awarded only the 'conditional *facultas docendi*'. His subsequent application for an appointment under the Royal Brandenburg Commission for Schools was curtly refused.

In fact Stirner never realized his ambition to become a *Gymnasiallehrer*. On leaving the University, he spent his probationary year (which in the event he prolonged to eighteen months) teaching Latin in Spilleke's Königliche Realschule in Berlin, and in Berlin he was to remain for the rest of his life. Although his activities between 1837 and 1839 have been only partly established, it is probable that he devoted some of that time to private study, in an attempt to repair the lacunae which his examiners had discovered in his knowledge. His only known social act during this time was to marry, in December 1837, Agnes Clara Kunigunde Butz, the daughter of his landlady, a colourless and ill-educated young woman of twenty-two, in whom he could have seen little more than a dependable and unprotestiug housekeeper. At any rate the marriage was short-lived, for his young wife died in August of the following year, in giving birth to a still-born child. Things being once again the same, Stirner placidly went back to lodge with his erstwhile mother-in-law.

It was not till October 1839, when he was already thirty-three years old, that Stirner obtained his first regular appointment of any kind, at a privately-run girls' high school in Berlin. In Madame Gropius's 'Institute for the Instruction and Cultivation of Superior Girls' he was to teach history and literature, apparently with some success, for the next five years. His employers, oblivious of the iconoclastic speculations to which he devoted his leisure hours, were evidently pleased by his unobtrusive politeness and quiet reliability, and this period, between 1839 and 1844, was the only time in Stirner's adult life when his position was comparatively secure and his life was relatively ordered and stable. Enjoying a modest but assured income, respected by his colleagues and acquaintances, and with ample freedom in the afternoons and evenings to pursue his reflections

in company or alone, he was now able for the first and only time to apply himself systematically and creatively to the definition of his philosophical identity. The 'apprentice years' were over. The 'time of the meridian' was about to begin.

Stirner's brief career as a philosopher spanned less than six years, and from our point in time can be seen to have been essentially the gestation, delivery, and fiery baptism of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, the work which alone gave direction, unity, and content to his otherwise desultory life. Cast to play merely a walking-on part on the intellectual stage, after vigorous rehearsals he turned his one speech into a sensational declamation which immediately threatened to stop the performance and which temporarily transformed the other dismayed actors into his enraged critics. Could anyone have predicted that the obscure, impassive, somewhat pedantic secondary schoolteacher would at the age of thirty-eight publish a book that would at once quicken the anxiety, inflame the indignation, and for a time monopolize the thunderbolts of such reigning giants as Marx, Engels, Feuerbach, and Hess? How did it come about that, after so many perfunctory years, Stirner at last emerged from his prolonged inertia and wrote a book which still shocks by its vitality and audacity, only to relapse into a lethargy even more impenetrable than before?

One answer may be that his new-found security furnished him, for this once, with the material conditions in which at length he was able to take stock of his situation and make his reckoning with the times. The times themselves, however, were thick with explosive charges, any one of which might have detonated the outwardly inert, but profoundly combustible, materials that must have been gradually shifting and settling in Stirner's consciousness. The 1840s were a period of mounting political disaffection and intellectual unrest throughout Germany, and the clubs and cafés of Berlin formed natural centres in which groups of young radicals could meet to cap one another's criticisms of government and society. One of the most notorious of these was the group of exuberant young freethinkers who called themselves 'die Freien'

or 'the Free Men' and who met regularly in Hippel's Weinstube on the Friedrichstrasse. Its members, mostly young journalists, teachers, officers, university students and lecturers in their twenties or thirties, included at one time or another Meyen, editor of the *Literarische Zeitung*; Rudolf Gottschall, the poet; Julius Faucher, the freetrader and later founder of the *Abendpost*; the poet of the Nibelungs, Wilhelm Jordan; and Gustav Julius, editor of the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung*. The young Karl Marx attended its discussions while he was completing his studies; and Engels, during his year of military service in Berlin, frequently took an enthusiastic part in the proceedings. There tended to be an informal but definite 'inner circle' among these enemies of privilege, focusing and articulating their dissonant polemics. By common consent the presiding dissident was the rebellious theologian, Bruno Bauer, then waging a public offensive against Church and State in the name of his own version of the critical philosophy, and beside Bruno and his brothers Edgar and Egbert there often sat Ludwig Buhl, editor of the *Berliner Monatsschrift* and translator of Louis Blanc, and several others of their more intimate associates. One of the regular members of this inner conclave was Stirner. He had begun to attend the meetings of 'die Freien' towards the end of 1841, and for the next three or four years he seems to have divided most of his time between his schoolteaching, which was not onerous, his personal studies and writings, and the long boisterous evenings at Hippel's. He was also fond of spending his afternoons at the Café Stehely, another contemporary haunt of restive Berlin intellectuals; and he paid frequent visits to the avant-garde reading-room kept by Willibald Alexis, where much of the source-material for his researches must have been readily accessible to him; but as time wore on he came increasingly to devote his hours of freedom to the congenial company in Hippel's, from which he would withdraw only to toil far into the night on the manuscripts which were ultimately to become his first and chief preoccupation. When it appeared, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* turned out to be a scathing repudiation of every moral and social viewpoint he had heard expressed among 'die Freien'; but its very exhaustiveness as a catalogue

of their intellectual follies and self-deceits is an irrefutable testimony to the part played by this fractious *Doktorklub* in animating Stirner to review his situation and compose his philosophical response to it.

Despite his invincible reserve, Stirner must have been uniquely at ease with himself and his disorderly companions in the permissive atmosphere of Hippel's, for night after night he was to be seen there, imperturbably smoking a cigar, occasionally making an ironic comment to a neighbour, but generally contenting himself with an ambiguous smile at the clamorous excesses of these metaphysical incendiaries. Others found the atmosphere less to their taste. The poet Herwegh visited the club on one occasion, as did Hoffman von Fallersleben: both left with the worst of impressions, interpreting its turbulence as vulgarity and its licence as inexcusable frivolity. In November 1842 another distinguished visitor, Arnold Ruge, who came with the publisher Wigand, stalked out after failing to make himself heard, declaring that social transformation was never inaugurated by a drunken rabble. Their reputation for debauchery, however, did not deter several young women from attending the meetings of 'die Freien'. One of these was an apothecary's daughter from Gadebusch near Schwerin, Marie Dähnhardt, a bold, emancipated young woman of twenty-five, whose contribution to the political and philosophical debates may have been slight, but who delighted the male members by her billiards-playing, her cigar-smoking, her beer-drinking, and her occasional willingness to accompany them on their excursions to the surrounding brothels. She was known to enjoy an inheritance estimated at nearly 30,000 thalers. The discriminating Stirner married her on 21 October 1843.

The marriage ceremony furnished one of the few anecdotes later to be related about the philosopher. It took place in his lodgings, where the pastor arrived to find the bridegroom playing cards with his two shirt-sleeved witnesses, Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Buhl. When the bride arrived, late and casually dressed, it was revealed that no one had thought to acquire the rings necessary for the exchange of vows between the happy couple. The solemn purpose was accomplished, however, by the two

copper rings from Bruno Bauer's large purse, which he produced with great presence of mind. The banter of the witnesses made good the absence of choir and congregation, and with fitting levity the two libertarians were united in holy matrimony.

Now possessed of private means that were far from negligible, Stirner turned to the composition of the literary masterpiece the publication of which would finally free him from the drudgery of paid employment. He had already made some mark as a journalist. In January 1842 he contributed a review of Bauer's book, *The Trumpet of the Last Judgmentagainst Hegel, the Atheist and Antichrist*, to Dr. Karl Gutzkow's *Telegraf für Deutschland*, and shortly afterwards he wrote a *Reply of a member of the Berlin community to the tract of the fifty-seven ecclesiastics, entitled 'The Christian Observance of Sunday': A friendly word to our laymen* for Robert Binder in Leipzig. His first important philosophical essay, 'The False Principle of our Education, or Humanism and Realism', appeared in four supplements to the *Rheinische Zeitung* during April 1842; this was followed in June of that year by another substantial essay on 'Art and Religion'; and between March and October he contributed numerous slighter articles, perhaps twenty-seven in all, to the same journal. Between May and December 1842 he also wrote thirty-three short articles for the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung*; while the first and only issue of Buhl's *Berliner Monatsschrift*, which was edited in 1844, included two major articles by Stirner, one offering 'Some Provisional Ideas concerning the State Founded on Love', and the other reviewing the German edition of Eugène Sue's novel, *Les Mystères de Paris*. In much of his journalistic writing Stirner was participating in the general offensive conducted by the Left Hegelians on prevailing institutions and ideas. Even in his early articles, however, which bear the marked influence of Feuerbach and Arnold Ruge, he clearly attests his independent ability to extend the critical work of his mentors in original directions, and the gradual but accelerating divergence of his thinking can be accurately traced, particularly in his four long essays for the *Rheinische Zeitung* and the *Berliner Monatsschrift*. The last of these in fact denotes his breach with the family of Young Hegelians.

If he began his journalistic career as a protégé and ally of Bruno Bauer, he ended it by adumbrating a scale of values which no longer merely represents an extension of the principles of Bauer's school, but in effect constitutes a self-confident repudiation of them.

Stirner's apostasy was made final and explicit in November 1844 by the publication of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*. Wigand made a good job of the first edition of the book, which consisted of one thousand copies, quickly distributed to evade the voracious censorship of the Leipzig *Kreisdirektion*, who were nevertheless prompt enough to impound two hundred and fifty copies. The characteristic wariness of the authorities, however, was compensated by their equally characteristic obtuseness, and a few days later the Saxon Minister of the Interior rescinded the order, on the grounds that the work was 'too absurd' to be dangerous. If the authorities failed to grasp the import of Stirner's book, his old associates were quick to express their resentment and disgust, for although many had known Stirner to be privately absorbed in preparing a definitive statement of his philosophy, he had confided its nature and contents to no one, with the result that the substance of his defection no less than its manner—now venomous, now patronizing—produced first confusion and dismay, then indignation and rancour, and finally a kind of hostile disbelief and derision among the ranks of 'die Freien'. Bruno Bauer himself apparently bore no grudge against his old drinking-companion, and they preserved an unembittered, if intermittent, acquaintanceship till the end of Stirner's life. But for the rest Stirner, succeeding beyond his wildest dreams, had managed at one stroke to alienate liberals, socialists, humanists, critical philosophers, in fact every shade of contemporary progressive opinion, in addition to receiving the guaranteed enmity of the united conservative orthodoxy. By his intervention he had checked each and every engrossed protagonist, temporarily bringing the moral and social debate to an astonished halt, and for a brief period he was the centre of all attention. Overnight he had achieved the glamour of notoriety. His cup was indeed full.

Confident of the glory that his masterpiece would immediately

bring him, Stirner had quitted his teaching post shortly before its publication. Teaching literature to the adolescent girls of a private academy was hardly a suitable occupation for the daring thinker who had written *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* and who had now, moreover, a wife on whom he could draw for financial as well as intellectual support. Certainly, the storm caused by his book promised to engage his attention, for it rapidly excited vituperative reviews in numerous literary journals, and for a period no discussion of Left Hegelianism could be regarded as complete without some appraisal of Stirner's disconcerting manifesto. Representatives of the parties who were the chief targets of his scorn promptly sprang to the attack: Szeliga, in the *Norddeutsche Blätter für Kritik, Literatur, und Unterhaltung*, on behalf of Bauer and his disciples; Hess, in a pamphlet entitled *The Last Philosophers*, on behalf of the socialists; and Feuerbach, in *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift*, on behalf of himself. In *Our Last Ten Years*, his compendious survey of the most recent German philosophy, Ruge felt obliged to devote a lengthy section to the author of *Der Einzige*; while his most painstaking, most energetic, and most distinguished critics of all, Marx and Engels, when they came to compose their vast condemnation of 'the German ideology' in 1845–6, were moved to spend virtually three-quarters of that work in mocking, mauling, and demolishing what they considered to be the systematically demented philosophy of 'Saint Max'. Stirner was unaware of Marx's savage arraignment in *The German Ideology*, which was not published even in part until the present century, but he lost no time in returning the fire of his other critics, to whom he addressed a comprehensive reply in the third volume of *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift* of 1845. To Kuno Fischer, whose article on 'The Modern Sophists' offered some of the most material objections, he made a separate reply, in the 1847 issue of *Die Epigonen*,[1] availing himself of this opportunity to elaborate some of his most characteristic themes. Fischer not only received the dignity of special recognition: his criticisms, it was to turn out,

[1] If, indeed, 'G. Edward' (the pseudonymous author) was Stirner himself, as Fischer for one certainly believed.

had elicited the last words Stirner was in fact to utter on any philosophical topic.

Stirner's hour of fame was brilliant but fugitive. Even by 1847, interest in his repetitive form of strident individualism had effectively subsided, as graver historical forces, portending upheavals far eclipsing any merely philosophical mutiny, gave rise to more urgent intellectual and social alarm. What had been at first regarded as an audacious philosophical *tour de force* soon came to be depreciated as a piece of protracted eccentricity, so that even the seriousness of the author's intentions was questioned; until at last, after this spasm of astounded curiosity, the public consciousness moved on to other preoccupations. There is nothing so tedious as an obsolete scandal. Even if all the ruthlessness of a redoubled censorship had not effectively dismantled most of the platforms available to intellectual rebels as the authorities' grip tightened in the next few years, Stirner would still have found it difficult to launch a meaningfully progressive literary career from the self-enclosed base of his philosophical narcissism: and his contemporaries had neither the time nor the patience to dwell for long on a thinker whom they rapidly judged by his very extremism to have foreclosed the possibility of any future evolution. Deprived of both a public and a theme, he turned to the safe if inglorious occupation of translating the economic writings of J.-B. Say and Adam Smith into German, a labour on which he was engaged till 1847. Although the eight volumes published by Wigand showed a competent craftsmanship, the promised translator's notes were conspicuously missing. Neither here, nor on any subsequent occasion, did Stirner bestir himself to infuse the slightest vestige of his originality into work which was of its nature so remote from the one object of his fulfilled but abiding interest—his philosophical self-identification and self-portrayal.

Moreover, even philosophically innocent employments were not to be willingly offered to an impious malcontent, even to one whose defiance had been so purely cerebral. Far from establishing himself as a professional man of letters, Stirner quickly had cause to regret the assured income which he had relinquished

when he quitted his despised teaching post. He made a number of ill-starred efforts to retrieve his rapidly failing fortunes, the most bizarre and the most disastrous of which, in the summer of 1845, was his promotion of a company to organize the distribution of milk in the Berlin suburbs. The milk soon 'ran sour down the drains', taking most of his wife's remaining assets with it, and by the following summer the philosopher's straits were such that he was compelled to advertise in the *Vossische Zeitung* for a loan of 600 thalers. Marie Dähnhardt was less than sympathetic to her husband's new speculations. With mounting indignation she accused him of improvidence, culpable fecklessness, and the idleness of complacent vanity. Finally, at the end of 1846, she left him, and the only correspondence between them thereafter concerned the settlement of their divorce, which took place in 1850.[1]

Apparently unruffled by the collapse of all his enterprises, Stirner made no systematic attempt to salvage anything from the shipwreck that was overtaking him. Although his last years were spent almost continuously in Berlin, he saw little of his former associates, confining himself increasingly to the anonymity of obscure apartments. By frequent and adroit removals he generally managed to evade his creditors, except for two brief periods in 1853 and 1854 which he spent in a debtors' prison, but despite his stated conviction that he would survive to a ripe old age he gave no sign of any desire to rehabilitate himself from what was now a wholly perfunctory and standstill existence.

[1] On leaving Stirner, Marie Dähnhardt went to London, where she earned her living by tuition and journalistic work, like so many of the other German émigrés of the time. In 1852 or 1853 she emigrated to Australia, where she experienced great poverty and was for a time reduced to working as a washerwoman. On the death of the workman she had married there, she returned to England, probably in 1871, and for the remainder of her life was able to live fairly comfortably on money inherited from a sister. She survived right up to the end of the century. When J. H. Mackay discovered her, she had long been living in great retirement in a religious institution, having embraced Roman Catholicism. She refused to see Mackay or to discuss with him a period of her life she wanted to forget, but in a few stinging sentences her letter to him referred to her 'very sly' first husband, with whom she had had 'more a cohabitation than a marriage'.

With literature he concerned himself less and less, and finally not at all. It is possible that in 1848 he wrote a series of articles for the *Journal des Oesterreichischen Lloyd* of Trieste,[1] while in 1852 his last work, a *History of Reaction*, was published in Berlin under his own name. To all intents and purposes, however, the author of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* had completely effaced himself. Of the two parts of his *History of Reaction*—'The Forerunners of Reaction' and 'Modern Reaction'—only the first volume of each part appeared, and these were virtually a compilation of the writings of Burke, Comte, and such contemporary political thinkers as Hengstenbergand Florencourt. 'Max Stirner' evidently had no more to say.

He had always been a withdrawn, elusive figure, but the last period of his life was the most crepuscular of all. If he somehow contrived to gain a livelihood, probably by among other things acting as an occasional intermediary in minor business transactions, he seems to have had no requirements or aspirations beyond this. From 1854 he received payments from a broker who agreed to buy at a discount, and in advance of her death, the house in Culm belonging to his mother, long since confined irrevocably to a mental home.[2] By such expedients Stirner generally managed to compound his few and tedious affairs from one phlegmatic month to another. He was not, however, destined to live to a ripe old age. In the May of 1856, in his lodgings with Frau Weiss in the Philippstrasse, he was stung in the neck by some kind of winged insect that must have been poison-

[1] Mackay is convinced that Stirner wrote eight articles in all for this journal. Its editor testified directly to Stirner's authorship of the first of these, while Mackay believed his authorship of the other seven to be conclusively proved by internal evidence. In any case, only indiscriminate devotion could find historic interest, far less philosophical significance, in such articles as 'The Germans in East Germany' or 'The Profusion of Children', even if they did come from Stirner's pen.

[2] In January 1835 Stirner's mother was admitted to Die Charité hospital, from which she discharged herself in July 1836. In October 1837, after the death of her second husband, she entered a private mental home in Berlin, where she remained until her own death in March 1859. She thus survived her son by nearly three years. Stirner never referred to his mother, and there is no record of his having visited her during her long confinement or of having shown any interest in her condition and circumstances—other than the testamentary interest mentioned in the text.

ous, for he fell into a violent fever, in which he lay for several weeks. He made what seemed a partial recovery, but the infection had entered his blood and he died in the early evening of 25 June. When he was buried in the Sophienkirchhof, Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Buhl were among the few mourners to attend the meagre funeral. One or two newspapers belatedly published bare announcements of the death of the author of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*.

Outwardly, Stirner's life must be adjudged a failure. His ideas, his reputation, and his personal happiness all ended in bankruptcy, and his last decade was spent without either place or role in a society which had long ceased to be conscious of his very presence. He himself, however, need not have been dissatisfied with such a life, for it had at least the distinctive consistency and unity imparted by his own character. A man of modest habits, taciturn and retiring by inclination, and with an ingrained tendency to be dilatory, he was basically lacking in any kind of driving ambition. His one single, comprehensive act of self-assertion was to write *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, after which he contented himself with the kind of indolent existence which best accorded with his impassive nature. Although, indeed, no apathetic man could have written *Der Einzige*, the self-assertion of the book is the metaphysical self-assertion of a man who asserts himself purely for the sake of having once conclusively asserted himself, and not because he is concerned to achieve any particular object. It is the self-portrait of a man with all the self-confidence and self-possession of someone who knows exactly his own possibilities and limitations and who is interested in little beyond these, of a man who counts absolutely in his own eyes and who therefore remains sufficient to himself whatever the tide or time. Every season was equally ripe, every season was equally uneventful, for the philosopher whose egoistic detachment left him essentially unmoved by other personalities or by circumstances, to which he was compendiously and effortlessly indifferent.

Judgments of failure require the adoption of criteria for success. Stirner explicitly rejected not only the criteria of personal success

adopted by his society and his age; he rejected not only each and every criterion proposed by the most latitudinarian of his philosophical contemporaries: he rejected the very concept of a uniform criterion which could be applied to himself as The Unique One, the metaphysical hero of his central work. Now, it might be alleged that Stirner's refusal to accept comparison was a flight from challenge, and that this was merely the chief example of his overall inability to accept the conditions of social life. It might further be insinuated that this was due to a basic personal disturbance of so gross a character as to vitiate the whole of his philosophical system, which might be viewed as its sublimated expression. Indeed, oue psychiatrist has explicitly maintained that *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* exhibits many of the features of a classical system of paranoid delusions,[1] and without doubt its author's life affords recognizable evidence of both the aetiological conditions and the recurrent symptoms of a significant personality disorder. He was an only child of parents who were no longer youthful, and his stepfather was already in advanced middle age when his mother remarried; he had been only an infant when his father died; in his fourth year he was separated for some months from his mother, who went north to Culm with her new husband; he had several homes during his upbringing, for much of which the parental roles were filled by his Bayreuth godparents, themselves elderly; and although the namre of his mother's mental illness is problematical, it was almost certainly constitutional and was of such gravity that she was totally incapacitated for the last twenty-four years of her life. From the clinical standpoint, it might be held that Stirner's adult history is the record of his repeated failure to pursue consistently any goal or to form any

[1] Ernst Schultze, 'Stirner'sche Ideen in einem paranoischen Wahnsystem', in *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*, vol. 36, no. 3, of January 1903. From the scanty evidence of his life, Schultze felt unable to reach an opinion as to Stirner's emotional normality. From the evidence of *Der Einzige* he concludes that, if the book escapes psychiatric condemnation, this is only because its author is prepared to extend to others the boundless egoistic irresponsibility which he claims for himself. The present writer will argue, however, that precisely such an extension is excluded, when the fullest implications of Stirner's concept of The Unique One are developed.

stable and enduring relationships. The procrastinations of his student career were more than matched by his later desultory attempts to find acceptable employment, his nomadic existence in one dreary Berlin lodging after another, his spasmodic incursions into literary work. He drifted twice into ill-assorted marriages which ended abruptly, in different ways but in ways which many would judge equally tragic. An anecdote of his first marriage related that he recoiled from any physical contact with his wife after he had once accidentally observed her unclothed body. His relationship to his second wife is summed up in her own words, that she 'had neither respected him nor loved him'.[1] She added that he was too selfish to make any friends, and in fact, while he was personally known to numerous people during the years when he frequented 'die Freien', throughout the whole of his life there is no record of a single person with whom he established a relationship of mutual affection. Thus we have the picture of a man, with such a background, who to those best placed to know him shows himself to be lacking in emotional responsiveness, uninterested in forming close attachments, and reserved to the point of being inaccessible; if we add to these his indifference to social approval and his morbid lack of concentration, the picture becomes that of a man exhibiting in marked degree several of the distinctive traits of a definite personality disturbance. A case might well be made, then, that the self-absorption, the destructiveness, and the negativism advocated and practised in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* represent the conceptual expression of the paranoid schizophrenia suffered by the philosopher who was at once the book's author and its subject.

Suppose we concede that the author of *Der Einzige* was an identifiable and lifelong psychotic. In any case, we cannot argue from the biographical facts of his case-history to the fallaciousness and futility of his philosophical ideas, for any finished diagnosis of Stirner's mental condition is bound to rely heavily on the evidence furnished by his avowal of these very ideas, which therefore require to be independently confirmed as groundless or contra-

[1] In her letter to J. H. Mackay.

dictory. Clearly, any judgment that *Der Einzige* constitutes a pathological tissue of obsessional fantasies must be preceded by an unbiased exposition and analysis of the contents of the book itself. However, even if it should transpire that Stirner's whole intellectual construction was in origin and import a comprehensive symbolization of viciously schizoid obsessions, far from annulling it as a serious philosophical venture this might well serve to heighten the interest and significance of his work. We cannot prejudge the question of whether the world-view of a paranoiac may be self-consistent or even illuminating. But there is a presumption in favour of surmising that the world seen from so vertiginous a vantage-point may present a spectacle sufficiently extraordinary, if alarming or scandalous, to compensate the adversities and the risks, the loss of intellectual chastity, involved in reaching it. And we can be sure that when we have understood *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, to which Stirner would ironically refer as his 'Ich', as the most intimate source and the most complete statement of his identity, we shall have deciphered the character of Stirner himself. If ultimately, when we have unmasked The Unique One of his book, biographical details are rendered unnecessary, that is because the quest for 'der Einzige' is the quest for the man who was Max Stirner.

CHAPTER II

THE MATRIX OF THE NIHILIST

MAX STIRNER must be one of the most solitary and discordant philosophers of any period. 'For me,' he says, 'this poor devil of language lacks a word',[1] and he seeks to place himself, 'the unnamable' and 'the unspeakable', beyond characterization or conjugation. It is certainly true that *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, one of the most self-supporting of philosophical manifestos, is translucently intelligible as a categorical document without recourse to the intellectual matrix in which it historically figured, and that its meaning does not require the terminology of any particular philosophical epoch. The book is essentially an act of self-designation, the only significance of circumjacent movements being that they serve to silhouette it. Nevertheless, even if the philosophical agitations of the time do not serve to illuminate a work which refuses location in any spectrum, the shadows cast by the work as it emerged from the contemporary cultural affray themselves have the effect of throwing the historic combatants into meaningful relief. If Stirner cannot be defined by his epoch, his philosophy in many respects functions as an epitaph on the main aspirations of his epoch. Moreover, despite its inner freedom from the intellectual resolves of its own or any other time, his philosophy in fact reflects, both by its choice of issues and by its metaphysical idiom, the German and European crisis of consciousness which it sought to abjure.

The fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century were in Germany a period of disenchantment and schism, in which both the political rulers and their academic proconsuls strove vainly to re-establish a cultural unity and a national idealism which were by then irrecoverable. During the years of Napo-

[1] *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, Reclam Universal-Bibliothek edition, 1892, p. 215. All references to *Der Einzige* will be to this edition, hereinafter abbreviated as D.E.

leonic oppression the Kantian ethic, with its emphasis on the reality of moral experience and its conception of morality as consisting fundamentally in obedience to law, had represented the spirit of intense moral earnestness which could speak radically to a people in need of authoritative leadership. In their subsequent struggle for liberation, the German people had been freshly inspired by the moral teachings of Fichte, whose deduction of the reality of nature from the known reality of moral effort had symbolized the gravity of action undertaken as vocation, and whose conception of a rational community of selves as the condition of any self-consciousness supported later political philosophies in which the State was held to guarantee the integrity of its individual members. With the Restoration, however, moral creeds which had once been the living expressions of a fertile national conviction became the entrenched dogmas of a rigid conservative orthodoxy, interested in ideological stability only for the sake of social sobriety. Even the passionate individualism of the Romantics did not operate to challenge the feudal complacency of the absolutist régime in the years after 1815: the early philosophy of Schelling, Romanticism's chief philosophical representative, was a form of mystical pantheism which may have encouraged individual effusions but which scarcely favoured a positive ethic of vehement social protest. And by Stirner's youth, the rationalistic, liberal ideals of the German Enlightenment had been catharsized into the urbane classical humanism epitomized by Goethe, whose calm love of perfection proved compatible with acquiescence in a jealously hierarchical social system dominated by a reactionary and obscurantist monarchy. The aristocratic governments of the German states, and the Prussian government in particular, entertained a basic distrust of speculative thought, but they were astute enough to promote those intellectual influences which they judged to vindicate their management of affairs and to reconcile their subjects to the existing arrangements. At heart they might have preferred the intellectual life of Germany to reflect their own massive inertia, perhaps by its shrinking to no more than a sycophantic and politically docile religiosity; in practice they may have wielded

a suffocating censorship of philosophical or theological doctrines which implied even the remotest criticism of the established order; nevertheless they were ready to approve, and sometimes to sponsor, philosophical teachings which by their stress on the organic unity of experience seemed to offer an intellectual foundation for the authoritarian organization of society. One philosophical system above all seemed to offer a profoundly spiritual interpretation of experience to which was annexed a powerful and subtle political theodicy. This was of course the philosophy of Hegelianism, which for more than a generation exercised an unprecedented ascendancy over virtually every department of German thought.

From 1818 to 1831 Hegel was Professor of Philosophy in the University of Berlin and the acknowledged Viceroy of German philosophy. For Hegel the highest interest of reason, typified by philosophy, was the overcoming of oppositions and divisions. If immediate experience is fraught with contradictions and if human relationships are disfigured by conflict, it becomes the task of philosophy to transform the clash of personal or party interests by demonstrating the ultimate unity within which human life must be conducted and individual needs satisfied. This unity is the Absolute, conceived both as the coherent totality formed by reality as a whole, and also as the system of truths which cannot be distinguished from this totality because it represents the Absolute's knowledge of itself. The Absolute, or the universe as a comprehended totality, is for Hegel identical with self-thinking thought, and to say that the Absolute is self-consciousness is for him to say that reality is a universal, self-motivating, self-luminous Subject, in short that reality is Spirit. Thus the laws of thought are the laws of reality, and to penetrate reality by dialectical thinking is to make manifest as Idea that whose nature consists in making itself manifest as Idea. Since ultimate reality or Spirit is essentially a process of self-development, in which its self-revelation is simultaneously a progressive self-constitution, it becomes the purpose of the philosophical historian to depict the life of the Absolute by exhibiting the rational dynamic structure of its advance as it unfolds itself in

world-history; and since the teleological evolution of Spirit is a process of self-realization, in which the reality of a phenomenon is determined by its degree of inner logical consistency and freedom from contradictions, the philosophical historian may proceed on the assumption that what is rational is real and what is real is rational.

The forms in which Hegel's world-spirit enshrines itself tend to an ever greater intelligibility, concreteness, and universality, as relatively incoherent and contingent structures decompose and reintegrate into increasingly richer, more stable, and more meaningful configurations. In its historical pilgrimage, the movement of Spirit communicates its inner logic to the philosopher, whose work actualizes and fulfils the process which it describes, and whose concern it therefore is to identify the necessary stages through which the world-consciousness passes as it absolutizes itself. The long night of Spirit, during which it slowly wrested itself from the rarefied intercourse of abstract concepts and translated itself into a multitude of successive textures in the objective world of Nature, ends when human consciousness begins to invest itself in a mounting series of cultural forms. When Spirit is objectified in the sphere of human freedom, it surpasses the narrow concepts of abstract right and of a purely formal morality to find its highest expressions in the institutions of the concrete ethical life, which for Hegel are the institutions of social life. In Hegelian terms, the immediacy and unity displayed in the life of the family logically necessitate the transition to the concept of 'civil society', which displays the converse elements of particularity and plurality as these are embodied in the separate and competing activities of the individuals of which a free society is essentially composed. In its fullest nature, however, the 'self-conscious ethical substance' finds its final identity in the State, which is no less than 'the manifestation of the Ethical Idea as Substantial Will', for it is in the State that 'absolute right' particularizes itself as the concrete ethical universal. The State, with its constitution, its laws, and its perfected machinery of government, is the ultimate moral synthesis, and its decrees are unconditionally valid: it is in truth 'the march of God upon earth'.

It should be clear why Hegelianism so rapidly found favour with the Prussian authorities. Its inventor might preach that infinite Spirit, unable to rest in any finite form, necessarily transcends the world of ethical life in order to find its supreme consummation in art, in religion, and pre-eminently in the absolute knowledge of systematic philosophy; but for the ordinary citizen Hegelianism presented a homily of social reconciliation, an encyclopaedia of his duties to the State, a summons to loyal and unquestioning service for the sake of his own higher being. Almost to the specifications of the régime, a conclusive philosophical refutation of its liberal and socialist critics had been furnished by the most celebrated thinker in Europe, who in the course of an irresistibly logical account of the nature of reality had firmly incorporated the existing Prussian State within the architecture of the spiritual universe. Thenceforward every moral and political debate had to be conducted within the terms of reference dictated by the metaphysical categories of Hegelianism, every proposal for social change had to be underwritten by a preliminary theological dissertation.

The death of Hegel in 1831 was a traumatic event for German philosophy. From the mass of his writings, his beneficiaries contended to extract the materials with which they could construct their own variations on the master's system, or they conducted experiments in applying his philosophical methods to problems which he had neglected. The 1830s were a period of readjustment, with all the insecurity characteristic of an intellectual interregnum. Of course Hegelianism also had its enemies, who had not been slow to express their hostility to the system, even before Hegel's death. The Orthodox Protestants, of whom Hengstenberg was a typical spokesman, suspected Hegel of pantheism, if not of covert atheism; theologians like Schleiermacher, for whom religious faith was essentially grounded in a feeling-state which was not compoundable by dialectical formulae, were the representatives of a Romantic distrust of reason's claims to supersede faith; the historical school of law, from its founder Hugo to its able younger advocates, the pietistic historian Leo and the prescriptive jurist Savigny, stood for an opposition to the

ambitions of reason as a self-consciously innovating social force; while independent thinkers like Trendelenburg, rejecting the Hegelian dialectic altogether, laboured to construct alternative metaphysical world-views. But for the most part, even those thinkers who were most avid to detect and publish Hegel's failures were at the same time desirous of correcting them by a more discriminating application of his logico-dialectical method. Speculative theists like Weisse and I. H. Fichte might criticize the ambiguities in Hegel's conception of deity or in his attitude to personal immortality, but they were nearly always united in their expressions of indebted respect for the Hegelian logic as a philosophical instrument.

Thus German philosophy during the 1830s and early 1840s, that is during the period when Stirner was coming to intellectual maturity, to a large extent took the form of an inquest on Hegelianism. Virtually every new philosophical standpoint had either to be formed within the Hegelian scheme of thought or to be specifically defined over and against it, and in fact the historic initiatives were taken by men who sought to extend or to recast the Hegelian phenomenology, which in its essentials they accepted. As the work of amplification and reconstruction came to be carried out, however, there arose between the various groups of Hegel's heirs fundamental differences in posture and alignment, reflecting the conflicting moral, political, and religious prepossessions which they brought to their task. Leading representatives of the Hegelian centre like Karl Rosenkranz, Hegel's biographer, or like the Aristotelian scholar and dialectical historian of morals, Michelet, attempted on the one hand to reconcile absolute idealism and religion by espousing an undogmatic form of metaphysical Christianity; on the other, to act as philosophical intercessors between the authoritarian State power and the liberal reformists; and generally, to canvas a spirit of sophisticated compromise and philosophical rapprochement between opposing social interests, each of which, they maintained, must take its condign place in the final synthesis. The greatest philosophical momentum, however, came initially from the right wing of the Hegelian school. Prominent academics like

Henning, editor of the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, the main organ of traditional Hegelianism; like Gabler, Stirner's former headmaster in Bayreuth and Hegel's successor in his Berlin chair; and like the philosophical jurist and arch-opponent of the historical school of law, Eduard Gans, were among those in the 1830s who were active in consolidating the influence of dialectical idealism in its more intransigent and socially conservative character, and who therefore adhered to what came to be termed the Hegelian Right. Among theologians Daub, and to a greater degree Marheineke, toiled unremittingly to employ the dialectical method in the service of a Protestant rational theology; while one of the most devoted and assiduous apostles of Right Hegelianism, Göschel, set himself the crucial task of showing that Christian requirements concerning belief in a personal God and in personal immortality were formally and materially satisfied by Hegel's doctrine of absolute Spirit. At virtually every point in German intellectual life, then, not only in logic and metaphysics but also in religion, ethics, aesthetics, jurisprudence, social and political theory, historical research, and even in the natural sciences, the tireless finger of the dead Hegel left its unmistakable imprint.

Although from an early stage such left-wing Hegelians as Feuerbach and Strauss were manufacturing radical objections to the received versions of the canon, throughout the 1830s it was the theologically orthodox and politically conservative wing of Hegelianism which tended to dominate the philosophical scene, and which must therefore have thrust itself most peremptorily upon Stirner's attention during his student days in Berlin. In the sphere of religion, Right Hegelianism stood for the attempt to reconcile absolute idealism with Christianity; in politics, it stood for concepts of citizenship and of the State which lent support to the paternalistic rule of the constituted authorities; in matters of conduct, it stood for rigid adherence to a prescribed and conformist morality. When Stirner first came to formulate his rejection of idealism, therefore, the targets which naturally presented themselves to his invective were the reigning princes of the Hegelian Right. The preliminary skirmishes in which he

figured, however, were not private expeditions of his own planning, but were part of the general campaign being conducted against Church and State by his provisional accomplices on the Hegelian Left.

So long as 'Hegelianism' was associated in the eyes of the authorities with the teachings of such men as Göschel or Gabler, it could count on high official approval, if not from the King himself, who strongly favoured the almost feudally loyalist principles of the High Churchmen, then certainly from the members of his government, from influential ministers like Altenstein and Schultze, who controlled the educational system in his name and who had been close personal friends of Hegel. In 1835 Altenstein assured the King: 'In the Prussian state a solidly founded philosophical system has now put an end to arrogant and deplorable doings. The government cannot extend its aegis over any other philosophy.' Perhaps Altenstein's assurance was premature, for the same year saw the publication of Strauss's sensational *Life of Jesus*, an event which marked the beginning of an insurrectionary campaign against the established order, a campaign which in the next ten years was to be carried to every quarter of German cultural life, and which was, moreover, directly inspired by the philosophy of Hegel and munitioned from the conceptual arsenal of Hegelianism. The 'Young Hegelians', from Strauss to Stirner, were consciously and systematically in revolt against the prevailing ideology and institutions of Prussian society as they knew it. If at their début they appeared as the devout exponents of a rejuvenated Hegelianism purified of fallacies and accretions, if at first they were conscientiously concerned to establish the legitimacy of their lineage, it soon became evident that their intellectual sympathies and their political aspirations were, both in spirit and in substance, diametrically opposed to those of their alleged mentor.

Using classical Hegelian concepts and modes of argument, the Young Hegelians rapidly reached conclusions which in effect nullified the whole upshot of the original system. Commencing with a critique of religion, they reversed the whole idealistic

orientation of the Hegelian dialectic, which they mobilized in favour of a passionately logical impeachment of past and contemporary philosophy, culture, morality, and law, and above all of the existing economic and political organization of society. The Young Hegelians stood for a destruction of all inherent authority, doctrinal and institutional, by a critical analysis of the presuppositions and functions of accepted beliefs and practices: in religion, this resulted in an increasingly explicit rejection of Christianity; in ethics, it signified an assault upon the merely ritualistic, the untenably conventional, or the indefensibly ordained; in social and political affairs, it amounted to an exposure and philosophical subversion of the régime and to a radical demand for the revision of the very nature and constitution of society. From a variety of standpoints, ranging from a humane liberalism to a militant communism, they called for a more or less drastic regeneration of German economic and political life from completely fresh principles. Although not all were reformers; although, for example, Bruno Bauer's philosophy terminated in an intellectualistic quietism and Stirner himself arrived at an asocial egoism; yet it was natural that they should be styled the 'Left Hegelians' and be compositely referred to as 'the Hegelian Left'.

The two Young Hegelians who fired the opening shots in the campaign against Christianity were David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach. In *The Life of Jesus* Strauss trained the full power of his critical armoury on the Gospels, which he showed with irrefutable logic to consist of professedly historical narratives, on inspection so riddled with internal contradictions that there were not the slightest rational grounds for accepting them as factual accounts of historical events. He argued that the Gospels must rather be understood as the products of a particular community in a particular age, who had sought to express the ideal truths of philosophy in the most adequate way open to them—in the form of *myths*. Modern Christian dogmas are the sophisticated symbolizations of religious myths which originally expressed the deepest experiences and highest aspirations of a Near Eastern people reared in the traditions of the Old Testament, and standards of

literal truth or falsehood are therefore strictly irrelevant to their evaluation. In the uproar engendered by Strauss's biblical criticism, he found himself accused by the orthodox Protestants of impious pantheism; while such accusations caused Hegelians of the Right, in an excess of self-exculpation, to offer feverish and ingenious demonstrations of the firmness of their own faith.

The odium incurred by Strauss was eventually shared by Feuerbach, who as early as 1830 had anonymously published a tract pronouncing Christian ideas of personal immortality to be no more than the conceptual expressions of a special kind of petty human egoism, and who nine years later, in an essay devoted to criticism of Hegel's 'rationalistic mysticism', appealed for a naturalistic revolution in Hegelianism. It was not, however, until 1841 that he published his *Essence of Christianity*, the first of a series of major philosophical works in which the phenomenon of religion was critically analysed and its place in the development of human consciousness displayed. Man's dual conception of his dependence upon Nature and of Nature's capacity to serve his freely chosen purposes leads him to think of the world as a unity produced by the will of a benevolent Creator. Man can only think the Creator, however, by projecting his own essence, that is by objectifying those personal and social characteristics which constitute *human* perfection and imagining these as inhering in an infinite and transcendent being. This being is God. Since for the religious consciousness God is set over against man as a distinct being, man's self-projection is equivalent to his self-alienation: 'religion is the separation of man from himself'. By transferring our own highest qualities to a remote being in whom they are conceived to reside perfectly and infinitely and who is therefore deemed to be the holy source of all value, we are in effect devaluating ourselves to the status of inferior, sinful creatures. Clearly for Feuerbach the essence of Christianity, as the culminating stage of religious evolution, was that it required to be overcome if men were to return to themselves as their own highest object. Declaring that 'God' is nothing but the name for the idealized essence of man himself, and that a perfected human species is the true subject of the attribute 'divine', Feuerbach came

forward as the apostle of the religion of humanity. Christianity had to be dissolved. Theology had to be transformed into anthropology, the dim worship of God into the burning love of mankind.

The Prussian government was not deceived about the import of these theological discussions. Critics of the established religion disseminated ideas which were inimical to the whole scheme of things within which the established régime had its ordained place. In June 1840 the old King, Frederick William III, had been succeeded by his spirited and ambitious son, whose conception of kingship may have been more urbane and imaginative than that of his narrower and more phlegmatic father, but who was no less determined to uphold the royal power, which he saw as a paternal authority specially instituted by God for the education of his people. Frederick William IV aspired to lead a Christo-Germanic empire whose brilliance, piety, and unity would stand as an example to the rest of Europe, and by his personal gifts to furnish the intellectual and spiritual leadership for a cultured and energetic nation. The high hopes entertained by liberals on the accession of the new King, and fostered by some of his early acts, such as the releasing of political prisoners and the partial relaxation of press censorship, were soon disappointed, however, as it became apparent that he was basically no more progressive than his father, but only less stable, subtler, and more self-willed, and therefore a more formidable match for all who wanted to free German life from feudal constraints and seigneurial monopolies. The brief royal honeymoon with press freedom ended abruptly when newspapers like the *Rheinische Zeitung* and the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung* began to publish vigorous and outspoken onslaughts on the policies of the government and on the character of the King himself. After numerous attempts to bridle their audacity had proved unsuccessful, these and other leading organs of radical opinion were finally forced to cease publication and their most daring contributors to flee the country. Eichhorn, who had followed Altenstein as Minister of Public Worship and Education, exercised a clumsy supervision over academic life which succeeded only in alienating university

teachers and incensing their students. The most notorious example of ultramontane fanaticism in the academic sphere was the King's appointment to the chair of philosophy in Berlin of the aged Schelling, whom he specifically commissioned to deliver a course of lectures in refutation of Hegelianism. The project ended in fiasco, but it indicated a clear awareness on the part of authority that the new turn taken by the Hegelian philosophy constituted an ideological threat of the first magnitude, and that positive measures would have to be taken if atheistic doctrines were not to gain hold of Prussian intellectual life. Among measures designed to increase still further the authority of a strict religious morality was the new marriage law projected by Savigny, now Minister of Legislation; and on every front officials were instructed to be ceaselessly vigilant in defence of the highest standards of Christian morality, now so far as possible to be publicly enforced.

If during the early 1840s the Young Hegelians were regarded as the most dangerous of the government's intellectual adversaries, they were far from being the only ones. The flood of discontent was swollen from many diverse, and often mutually antagonistic, sources. Although Stirner received his induction as a Young Hegelian and fought alongside them in his first taste of cultural warfare, he could not have failed to witness the struggles being conducted on other parts of the same battlefield. On every hand he must have encountered the partisans of 'Young Germany', those practitioners of the literature of social protest, so many of whose names—above all that of Heine—were then household words. He must have read of the triumphal tour through Germany made by the young poet of revolt, Georg Herwegh, in the autumn of 1842. He had certainly read the work of another literary figure who intervened dramatically in politics, *This Book Belongs to the King* by Bettina von Arnim, who with a nice mixture of romantic loyalty and sentimental pity appealed to the monarch to consummate his piety by relieving social distress. The earnest royal government gave new causes for grievance almost daily to the educated middle classes throughout its domains, and their disaffection expressed itself at numerous points and in numerous forms.

Stirner was naturally less interested in the often confused and extravagant remonstrances of literary hotspurs than in the more serious and systematic social criticism made by economists, historians, and philosophers. The theories of French democratic socialism had been introduced to the German public by Young Hegelians like Lorenz von Stein and Ludwig Buhl, from whose writings Stirner became acquainted with the socialist humanitarianism of Louis Blanc; and like all his contemporaries he was familiar with the socialist anarchism of Proudhon's *What is Property?*, which had appeared in 1840 and with which he had to come to terms in defining his own conception of property. But it was the native German communists who were most certain to attract Stirner's amused interest by their efforts to place their socialistic programmes on a truly 'philosophical' footing. The solemn utopianism of a Weitling or of a Moses Hess, with his description of communism as the ethics of pure love deducible from the reason and justice which are the 'true' nature of man, was in many respects the application to political affairs of Feuerbach's 'anthropology', and was therefore bound to draw the attention of anyone concerned with the comprehensive state of German philosophy in the 1840s. As in every other sphere, however, it was of course the Young Hegelians themselves whose political criticism proved to be the most sophisticated, historically the most significant, and immediately the most infuriating to the sensitive Prussian government. Much of it was published in such journals as the *Rheinische Zeitung* under Marx's editorship, and much of it in the series of *Jahrbücher* edited by Arnold Ruge, to which Marx and Engels also latterly contributed. Marx and Engels quickly surpassed Ruge's liberal faith in radical reform to be brought about by the rational dialectic of party competition within the institutional framework of a politically neutral State, but they were initially prepared to make common cause against a royal bureaucracy which stifled liberals and communists alike. The government suppressed Ruge's *Hallische Jahrbücher* in 1841, and when their successors, the *Deutsche Jahrbücher*, were also suppressed two years later, he wisely transferred his activities to Paris, where he and Marx jointly edited the *Deutsch-französische*

Jahrbücher. The differences of outlook between Ruge and his communist collaborators were soon aggravated by serious financial handicaps, however, and in fact the first issue of the new *Jahrbücher* transpired also to be the last.

Thus within a few years Hegelianism, from being the staunchest ideological bulwark of Prussian autocracy, had become the damnable heresy of philosophical demagogues; and far from being favoured archpriests in the academic hierarchy, the Hegelians who had now gained prominence were virtually intellectual outlaws, their writings proscribed and their names on the police records. The Hegelianism into which Stirner was drawn had become a philosophy of disaffection, of political and religious dissent, and it was in his capacity as a total rebel that he temporarily joined fortunes with the Young Hegelians. During the height of their notoriety he was daily in the company of some of their most antinomian representatives, while one of the most typical and in many ways one of the most able figures, not only among 'die Freien' but in the Young Hegelian movement at large, was Bruno Bauer himself, Stirner's closest associate in the gatherings at Hippel's. Originally a theologian, in his *Critique of St. John's Gospel* and *Critique of the Synoptic Gospels* Bauer had carried Strauss's biblical criticism to a point at which there was nothing to choose between Christianity and explicit atheism. The Gospels were held to be fantasies, the free poetic creations of the individual human evangelists, expressing neither divine truth nor historical truth but merely the private aims and characters of their writers. Christianity is to be understood as merely one of the products of the free human self-consciousness, whose self-motivating activity is the source of all artistic, moral, and intellectual constructions. The conclusion drawn by Bauer was that the nature of ultimate reality was to be found, not in the classical Hegelian Absolute or in Strauss's communal mythologizing, for these are presented as quasi-objective 'substances' unfolding themselves in the historical process or defining themselves through the racial consciousness; but in the infinitely subjective sphere of the individual human self-consciousness, which exists as an activity of dissolution, criticizing and thereby

overthrowing every presupposition which implies a limit to free human reflection. To think is to analyse—concepts, practices, institutions—by means of logic, to engage in the critical destruction of fixed principles, to liberate the human spirit by a work of perpetual intellectual revolution. To think critically is to act, and to act is purely to think. Bauer's 'philosophy of pure criticism', ending in what was tantamount to a solipsism of Reason, may have been the *reductio ad absurdum* of this variety of Young Hegelianism as a practical force. Its immediate significance was to shape the lens through which Stirner would view the philosophical predicament of his age.

The vortex in which Stirner encountered Young Hegelianism, and through which he inhaled the vexed atmosphere of the times, was centred on Bruno Bauer and permeated by Bauer's special brand of omnivorous scepticism. Yet while Bruno, with his brothers Edgar and Egbert, was undoubtedly the focal figure among 'die Freien', animating their heady discussions with his flow of allusive badinage, he could hardly be described as the 'leader' of so centrifugal and protean a gathering. In fact it is hard to determine the collective role played by 'die Freien' during the intellectual ferment of the 1840s. Although some of its individual members took an active part in the revolutionary agenda of 1848, the group as such cannot be said to have contributed in any very effective way to the train of public events leading up to the national convulsion. Throughout the early years of the decade it functioned more as an intellectual clearing-house in which avant-garde writers, disenchanted academics, and footloose journalists could meet to exchange the latest political news, to discuss proposals for social and educational reform, to criticize current philosophical and religious ideas, or to ventilate the grievances generally felt by the restless but politically impotent Berlin intelligentsia, than as a practical and specific political force. To the philosophically attuned ear the note struck by their debates may have been characteristically Young Hegelian, but the diffuse stream of recruits to their meetings must at one time or another have included representatives of almost every shade of liberal and left-wing opinion. If the members of 'die

Freien' were powerless to exert any material influence on the shape or direction of contemporary history, their discussions certainly made up a catalogue of the issues requiring settlement and of the multifarious projects for settling them then in philosophical currency. The silent Stirner, sitting as 'the chiel amang them takin' notes' and revolving within himself his private schemes of metaphysical empire, was thus in a unique position to feel the pulse of contemporary discontent and to make his own settlement with or without reference to the models on display.

If from one point of view *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* appears to be of purely historical interest, as simply one of the more arresting contributions made to a philosophical debate in vigorous progress among the younger German intellectuals during the 1840s, this is perhaps because virtually every page of the book furnishes evidence of its author's preoccupation with contemporary philosophical themes and with the solutions popularly canvassed. It is not surprising that Stirner should have been awake to the cultural mêlée going on around him, or that he should have been conscious of its significance in the historic context of recent German philosophy. He must have heard the battle-cries of the combatants at almost every turn. He may already have been introduced to Hegelian modes of thought and educational principles at his Bayreuth Gymnasium, where Gabler, Hegel's zealously loyal disciple and future successor in Berlin, was for many years Director. As a university student, he sat at the feet of the master himself, heard Michelet lecture on Aristotle, Marheincke on theology, and thus became directly acquainted with orthodox Hegelianism, in its most conservative forms, at the very fount and origin of the system: his examination essay, 'On School Rules', testified to the influence of Hegelian concepts and dialectical procedures on his as yet unripened thinking. It was also in the University of Berlin, where he listened to Schleiermacher on ethics and followed Trendelenburg's course of lectures on Aristotle's *De Anima*, that he encountered the early expressions of religious and academic opposition to Hegelianism as a

philosophical method and perspective. By the time Stirner finished his formal education, in the year of Strauss's bombshell, he had been equipped with a fair working knowledge of the state of German theology and metaphysics just before Left Hegelianism exploded into the arena.

During his years as a schoolteacher, that is during the years when he was gradually working out his own philosophical position, Stirner had more than ample opportunity to appraise the changing morphology of German intellectual life. By all the ways in which an intelligent man who is alert to the climate of opinion around him can come to have a clear appreciation of the forces and the beliefs actively shaping the mind of the society in which he lives, Stirner must have been able to arrive at a sharp and reasonably comprehensive assessment of the nature and direction of the main currents of opinion—political Romanticism, reactionary Christianity, the feudal social philosophy of the Royalists, the theism and the humanism of the Old and the Young Hegelians, political liberalism, philosophical socialism—which were shaping the intellectual temper of contemporary Prussian society. Moreover, he had opportunities not commonly vouchsafed to the average alert intellectual. His activities as a newspaper correspondent brought him into daily touch with a wide range of sources of knowledge and opinion and gave him well-informed connections in Cologne, Leipzig, and Hamburg as well as in Berlin. And above all, his regular presence, over three years, at the nightly meetings of 'die Freien' placed him in a unique vantage-point from which he could survey the territory under dispute and the cultural gladiators embattled on it. The wine-parlour at Hippel's was one of the citadels of Young Hegelianism, and the metropolis itself of the philosophy of 'sovereign criticism'. There Stirner could meet the Bauers, liberals like Buhl, or humanists like Engels on a personal footing; he could listen to radicals like Ruge or Köppen, or poets of revolt like Gottschall, Jordan, Herwegh, and Hoffman von Fallersleben; if Old Hegelians, speculative theists, orthodox Protestants, and ultramontane royalists were somewhat under-represented, at least their ideas must have been in frequent currency, if only as

objects of vilification and ridicule from the caustic tongues of 'the free men'.

But of course, however extensive his personal relationships, Stirner's firm grasp of the issues at stake in the contemporary social and religious conflict could only have come from a close study of the fundamental works in which these issues were stated and discussed, and in fact he demonstrably had a detailed familiarity with the crucial philosophical literature of the day. From the internal evidence of *Der Einzige*, it is clear that he was conversant with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, with his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, his *Philosophy of Right*, and his published lectures on the philosophy of history. He had read Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, his *Principles of Future Philosophy*, and his *Prolegomena to the Reform of Philosophy*. He knew his way around the seven volumes of Bruno and Edgar Bauer's *Reminiscences in Recent History since The Revolution*, and had read the latter's works on *The Liberal Movements in Germany* and *The Quarrel of Criticism with Church and State*. Of the other writings of Bruno, he had studied *The Good Cause of Freedom and My Own Business*, *Christianity Discovered*, *The Jewish Question*, and *State, Religion, and Party*, all of which appeared in 1842 or 1843. The views of political liberals were represented in his reading by the recent works of Rutenberg, Bettina von Arnim, and several others. He was acquainted with Moses Hess's *The European Triarchy*, with Proudhon's *What is Property?* and *The Creation of Order among Humanity*, and with the most recent writings of Lorenz von Stein, Weitling, and other socialists. He was familiar with the *Anecdota of Recent German Philosophy*, edited by Ruge; he had read the *Twenty-one Sheets from Switzerland*, edited by Herwegh and containing important articles by Hess and Bauer; and he had consulted the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher*, containing Marx's articles on the Jewish question and in criticism of Hegel's philosophy. From the works directly cited or discernibly used in the writing of *Der Einzige* alone, it is indisputable that Stirner had prepared himself for his comprehensive evaluation of existing German ideology by massive researches into the distinctive complexion of the major philosophical coalitions of the day.

His numerous contributions to the *Rheinische Zeitung* and the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung* also testify to the breadth and intensity of Stirner's interest in contemporary events and ideas. Most of his articles dealt either with political and academic controversies then exciting public attention or with recent publications bearing upon the political and ideological concerns of the radical Prussian intelligentsia. On the assumption that he read the books which he reviewed, his reading must have included such motley ingredients as Rosenkranz's *Königsberg Sketches*, Edgar Bauer's defence of his brother in *Bruno Bauer and his Opponents*, the anonymous *Morality is Better than Law*, discussing the proposed marriage reforms, and even a pamphlet on the conduct of the Berlin Legal Faculty—the first of these by a prominent Hegelian of the Centre, and the others all from the pens of committed Hegelians of the Left. His journalistic writings also show him to have had considerable intimacy with a wide variety of current newspapers and periodicals, ranging from *The Foreign Quarterly Review* and the highly respectable *Jenaische Literatur-Zeitung* to Ludwig Buhl's latest pugnacious venture called *Der Patriot*. His apprenticeship in radical journalism may not immediately have revealed any remarkable philosophical powers, but it manifestly provided him with the occasion and the facilities for compiling the long list of targets, and for testing some of the small arms, which were to figure in his later career as a deadly philosophical marksman.

Because of Stirner's absorption with the political and philosophical literature of the period, it is relatively easy to assess the extent to which he is indebted to his predecessors and contemporaries, and to detect the ways in which their ideas influenced his thinking. Every sentence of *Der Einzige* was written with a lively consciousness of the specific philosophers who would read it, who would take it as being directly addressed to them, and who could if they wanted congratulate themselves on having received a terse commendation or squirm at finding themselves the objects of a detailed and sarcastic refutation. Stirner borrowed profusely from the concepts and terminology of Hegelianism (although often putting these to his own idiosyncratic uses), and he leaned heavily on the methods of argument and formal

schemata generally in favour among the Young Hegelians; but he was chiefly indebted to his predecessors for having identified the issues to be settled, for even if their attempts to settle them required total demolition they had at least the negative and labour-saving merit of having charted the dimensions of his task. The numerous ways in which Stirner's intellectual milieu recorded its impression on the features of *Der Einzige* will be evident in later chapters as his ideas come to be expounded and analysed. Here it will be enough to note briefly the most striking points of convergence and departure.

It is above all the influence of Hegel which announces itself everywhere in *Der Einzige*. His characteristic concepts are to be found, often severely mutilated but always recognizable, at every stage and in every section of the book. His conception of the mind's activity as a kind of destruction or annihilation of the brute objective world, which it appropriates by assimilating to itself, reappears in Stirner's account of the relationship between The Unique One and the world as a relationship of 'consumption', in which objects are appropriated by 'ingesting' them and reducing them to the self's own inner nothingness. His conception of 'alienation', as the schism in Spirit whereby Spirit fails to recognize what is essentially its own objective reflection and so is driven to embark on the series of movements which will only terminate in the recovery of the lost unity, is transferred by Stirner to the predicament of the individual self dominated by its own creatures until it reappropriates them and thereby recovers its self-possession. In fact, throughout *Der Einzige* it is the Hegelian concept of Spirit, as the universal self-consciousness progressively enfolding every particular finite existent within itself, which Stirner is ultimately concerned to defeat in favour of his own concept of the private and exclusive consciousness of The Unique One. And, throughout, Stirner develops and presents his ideas in the classical Hegelian forms of the triadic progression of thought, whereby every truth is supposed to have three aspects or stages, of which the first two, affirmation and negation, are incomplete aspects, while the third, synthesis, emerges as a final unification of these contradictory elements. The supreme triad, which for

Hegel is the dialectical transition from consciousness through self-consciousness to reason, is represented for Stirner by the passage from realism through idealism to egoism, a progression which he claims to discern in various dimensions of experience. Like Hegel, in the first chapter of *Der Einzige* Stirner illustrates this dialectical movement from the span of a human life, the child being the 'realist', the youth the 'idealist', and the grown man the mature egoist. Also like Hegel (although with considerably less erudition and historical sophistication), he applies the triadic scheme to human history: the world-outlook of the Ancients disintegrates and yields to the cultures, religions, and philosophies of the Moderns, including and culminating in the Young Hegelians, themselves eventually to be superseded by the egoistic consciousness which, as an entirely new mode of being, transfigures and dominates all those which have gone before. Whereas for Hegel the terminus and consummation of history is signified by the self-fulfilment of sovereign Spirit in absolute freedom, for Stirner it is the self-realization of The Unique One in and through his property which constitutes the natural dénouement of philosophical thought.

The immediate predecessor whose contagious dialectic is practised in the central chapters of *Der Einzige* (where it is characteristically used to confute its own artificer) was of course Bruno Bauer. Stirner was voraciously ready to take over Bauer's philosophy of boundless criticism exposing and dissolving all limits which constrain the thinker or warp the dynamic, self-regulating movement of his thought. Where Bauer shows himself to be still at heart a theologian, however, is in his failure to carry his activity of perpetual dissolution into the privileged categories of 'humanity' and of 'consciousness' itself, since even after he had repudiated 'human consciousness' as the source and author of the critical activity he merely postulated instead the equally remote figment of 'pure self-consciousness' as sovereign judge and critic. Stirner criticizes the Critics for having elevated 'Criticism', in the form of pure thought, to the quasi-religious status of a transcendent absolute, and to it he opposes the concrete, incommensurable reality of The Unique One, ceaselessly perishing

and re-emerging from the 'creative nothingness' in which it is rootlessly rooted. From Bauer's Criticism he is determined to eradicate the last vestiges of idealistic substance, or of any kind of identification of being with thought, and to re-appropriate, in face of this last desperate attempt at his alienation, the self-centred and therefore indefeasible being of the private, solitary individual in all his self-justifying immanence. As in Hegel's idealism, so in Bauer's Criticism, it is ultimately a deified consciousness which waits to be revealed as the omnipresent and indefatigable enemy of the self. But The Unique One needs no gods, and his very existence is thus an affront to any candidate for Olympus, even—indeed particularly—when his campaign, like Bauer's, is based on a critical exposure of all the other candidates. Stirner was prepared to side with Bauer in the joyful work of deposing the gods, but he would not hesitate to destroy him the moment he aspired to usurp their vacant throne.

If The Unique One needs no gods, still less does he need men. The most important, and by far the most celebrated, of Stirner's living contemporaries was Feuerbach, from whom he also borrowed heavily and whom he repaid by digging him a special grave in the philosophical cemetery he was busily constructing. The inscription on the stone was to read: 'God, alias Man'. Stirner clearly saw in Feuerbach's declaration that 'man is to man the supreme being' yet another attempt to reincarnate God under the pretence of evicting him. In declaring man to be divine, Feuerbach was in fact resurrecting the dead God and seeking to clothe him in human flesh, for 'the essence of Christianity' was that it indeed lived on in the allegedly atheistic humanism of Feuerbach. By submitting Feuerbach's 'anthropology' to the ruthless dissection which he himself had practised on theology, Stirner showed the ideal of a perfected humanity to have all the alien characteristics which its apostle had successfully diagnosed in the concept of transcendent divinity. The devotee is expropriated from himself, whether he worships a transcendent God or binds himself to the service and love of 'mankind', and the humanistic consciousness is no less alienated, no less the projection on to an abstract and fictitious entity of essentially personal

qualities—that is, qualities always naturally belonging to some particular concrete self—than is the religious consciousness which Feuerbach expended so much talent and energy in unmasking. Stirner certainly considered Feuerbach's works to deserve the most detailed study. Indeed, the general plan of *Der Einzige*, with its two main divisions of 'Man' and 'I', is based upon that of *The Essence of Christianity*, with its division into two parts entitled 'The true, or anthropological, essence of religion' and 'The false, or theological, essence of religion' respectively, and it may be said that from one point of view Stirner's achievement was to carry Feuerbach's religious critique to its logical conclusion by demonstrating *all* religion, whether theological or anthropological, to be essentially a dispossession of the only reality there is—the reality of the private, unique self, who is indefinable because he is without an 'essence' of any kind. Feuerbach's service was to show him just how far it would be necessary to travel, and just how much it would be necessary to throw overboard, if he wanted to reach the *ne plus ultra* of total and uncompromising atheism. From his study of Feuerbachian humanism he saw that the total atheist must reject not only the ideal of a transcendent God, but *all* ideals, and thus that only the nihilist can qualify as the true atheist. From his study of Feuerbach he was led to see that rejection of the God Who is Love must be completed by rejection of that love for mankind which is sanctified by humanists as the supreme moral ideal, and thus that the true atheist is necessarily a total egoist. It was ultimately from his study of Feuerbach, therefore, that Stimer was brought to recognize himself as a nihilistic egoist and to state his protest in the grim and exultant language of nihilistic egoism.

Both Feuerbach and Bauer had much to say about the socialist and democratic movements of the time, and must therefore also be numbered among those diverse radicals of whose ethical and political writings Stirner availed himself on the many occasions that he wanted to annotate his nihilistic egoism by exhibiting its application to contemporary social issues. When Stimer criticized the democratic activism of Ruge, for example, to the effect that substituting a liberal democratic state for the Christian autocracy

of Frederick William IV would only result in replacing one tyranny by another tyranny which would be still more ruthless and efficient in its expropriation of The Unique One, his criticism in many respects echoed those made by Blanc, Stein, Hess, and Marx in articles with which he was certainly acquainted. And when subsequently it became the turn of the socialists (chiefly in the person of Proudhon) to look down Stirner's gun-barrels, it was an article by Edgar Bauer in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* which was to furnish him with convenient ammunition: the accusations that Proudhon's 'social justice' was merely a reformulation of the concept of the divine law-giver as the eternal ground of right conduct, and that his 'Man-as-Worker' was as alien and as transcendent as any concept of a 'Supreme Being', were exactly of the kind Stirner was only too willing to enlist in his work of deicide. If, however, in partnership with the Bauers Stirner might be ready to deride the philosophical representatives of 'the Mass' and to deflate their solemn claims on behalf of the dignity of manual labour, he had no intention of freeing himself from the drudgery of manual labour only to submit to the still more exacting demands made by intellectual labour, in the sense of Bauer's 'sovereign activity of criticism', and he went on almost in the next breath to denounce his provisional allies for seeking to encompass The Unique One by the ascription to him of a 'vocation', in this case the vocation of intellectual fastidiousness. The nihilistic egoist refuses all vocations, whether political, economic, or spiritual, and thus, whatever his temporary alignments with liberals, communists, or critical intellectuals, the point is soon reached when these must be abruptly and impenitently severed if he is to remain in sole and exclusive possession of himself. While Stirner was prepared to borrow freely from such of his predecessors or contemporaries as could be of use to him, he had no foolish scruples about jettisoning their cherished projects the moment they ceased to serve his own overriding purpose.

This in fact sums up the whole of Stirner's relationship to his intellectual environment. He had an urgent account to render, an account of himself and of his metaphysical and moral where-

abouts, and he happened to render it at the height of a particular social and religious conflict in which German intellectuals were embroiled during the early 1840s. Its ultimate significance, however, is global and perennial. Stirner's form of nihilistic egoism exemplifies a kind of response which it is open to philosophers of any age or culture to make, and which others have in fact made, although none so categorically and comprehensively as he. Because he lived when he did, he happened to state it in the terminology of that time and to define it against the issues which were then pressing, but it can be stated in face of other issues, while certain other terminologies—in particular, as will be argued, that of modern existentialism—may serve to state it even more persuasively. In *Der Einzige* Stirner has much to say about '*proprietary* thinking, *my* thinking, a thinking which does not lead me but is directed, continued, or broken off by me at my pleasure'.[1] 'If I attain to property in thought', he says, 'they [viz. thoughts] stand as my creatures.'[2] For the proprietary thinker, an idea is always recognized to be only 'my judgment, which I can at any moment *change*, i.e. annihilate, take back into myself, and consume',[3] and for the nihilistic egoist, therefore, who is 'entitled to everything of which he can empower himself,'[4] those ideas of others which he can appropriate are thenceforward at his entire disposal, to put to such uses as he pleases and to adapt or redirect as he judges fit. In the light of these open professions, the whole of *Der Einzige* can be viewed as a sustained exercise in 'proprietary thinking', in the course of which its author first appropriated, then transformed, and finally discarded the concepts and modes of argument in use among the various philosophical factions around him. He might requisition the philosophical resources of a Feuerbach, a Bauer, or a Marx, but he was not bound to deploy them according to the same strategies or towards the same objectives. One thing is certain. Whatever points of comparison may exist between Stirner and his predecessors or contemporaries, in *Der Einzige* he was seeking to articulate a vision of the world and the self's place in it which was wholly and peculiarly his own, since in its essentials, in its reckless

[1] D.E., p. 397 [2] D.E., p. 401. [3] D.E., p. 398. [4] See D.E., p. 221.

celebration of egoistic irresponsibility and its systematic refusal to ascribe virtue or meaning to experience, it is a vision profoundly repugnant to each one of those philosophers to whom he might seem most indebted. The configuration of ideas in which his creative impulse embodied itself could have been assembled from the intellectual resources which surrounded him: the creative impulse was his alone.

CHAPTER III

THE DESCENT INTO THE VACUUM

THE evolution of Stirner's thought between his first published writings in January 1842 and the appearance of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* in November 1844 is clearly plotted by the series of increasingly confident articles and essays which he published in various newspapers and periodicals during that time. In less than three years Stirner traversed a direct and unerring route from a commonplace if militant liberal humanism, by way of a recklessly defiant individualism, to the relaxed and arrogant form of nihilistic egoism in terms of which he finally settled his philosophical identity. His progress resembles that of a man at first engaged with others in heated battle, who wades far out into the enemy destroying and clearing a space around his forward movement, until at last, having long since left his comrades inaccessibly behind, he finds himself utterly alone in a distant place, surrounded by silence and the corpses of his opponents. In his journalistic writings we can see Stirner's early radical concern, his passionate detestation of social convention and political authority, yielding gradually but inevitably to a self-centred disregard of moral and religious prescriptions, and then at last to the solitary and calm self-possession of the nihilist.

His contributions to the *Rheinische Zeitung*, as one of its regular Berlin correspondents between March and October 1842, display his original violent, almost unreflective adherence to the party of social and intellectual reform. Mostly reviews, reports of controversial political events, or the bruiting of current rumours and discontents, they range from very short notices to quite lengthy and substantial articles, written often in the style of a newspaper leader or a 'Berlin Letter'. His choice of themes accurately portrays the contemporary preoccupations of the Young Hegelians: a report on the difficulties experienced by a Straussian theo-

logical student in Copenhagen; frequent animadversions on the press censorship or demands for a generally greater liberty of expression; numerous references to the course of events leading to Bruno Bauer's dismissal from his academic post in Bonn, an issue which was then a kind of rallying-ground for everyone committed to the cause of intellectual freedom: all energetically stating the radical case with notable economy and acidity. Several articles are devoted to the favourable publicizing of works by avante-garde critics of the régime, drawing attention to pamphlets from the press of the celebrated 'Berlin Reading-Room' or to the first issue of Buhl's new monthly, *Der Patriot*. The contributions sent by Stirner to the great opposition newspaper in Cologne might have been written by almost any disaffected young Berliner who had the opportunity and the resources to strike a verbal blow against the entrenched forces of Prussian dogma and theological reaction.

His contributions to the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung* between May and December 1842, were made in the same vein, but typically consist of rather longer articles and reviews, often composed almost entirely of extended quotations from the works he commended to the attention of the newspaper's Saxon readers. For a period, active political opposition in Berlin being virtually strangled, the interest of German radicals focused on Königsberg, where a new initiative had recently been taken by several prominent liberal personalities, and many of Stirner's articles follow closely the fresh developments in the East Prussian capital. Thus, he devotes three long articles to the extraordinary affair of Dr. Jacoby, charged with high treason for having had the audacity to publish an appeal for greater popular participation in government; he gives a long account of the book, *Whence and Whither*, by von Schön, then President of the East Prussian assembly and a convinced liberal; he gives a sympathetic summary of Rosenkranz's *Königsberg Sketches*, his only reservation being that their author's standpoint is too moderate to define certain burning issues with the full sharpness they require; and he describes in detail four sensational public lectures given to an enthusiastic audience of local bourgeois by Walesrode, a leading

contributor to the *Hartungsche Zeitung*, the sophisticated but outspoken organ of liberal opposition in the city. His other articles illustrate the range and character of his dominating interests: he comments scornfully on the new divorce laws; he has much to say about the prevalent threats to academic freedom; he discusses the schism in the Berlin legal faculty between the historical and the philosophical schools of law; and he blithely confirms that a club of free-thinking young intellectuals, known as 'die Freien', indeed exists and holds regular meetings in Berlin. Once more, the dismissal of Bruno Bauer, with its aftermath of protest and recrimination, figures as a recurrent and crucial theme throughout Stirner's writings. In a supplement he spends many pages discussing the 'minority report' submitted by Marheineke, who, while acknowledging Bauer to be in theological error, denied that his views were necessarily anti-Christian, suggested that his proper sphere of employment was in a philosophical faculty, and attributed the whole imbroglio to an ill-advised confusion of ecclesiastical and academic affairs. In his contributions to the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung* also, then, Stirner showed himself to be engrossed by the topics characteristically at issue in the view of those fractious libertarians with whom he was most closely associated. Active in directing the concern of the public to what he held to be the most glaring abuses of governmental prerogative, aggressively identifying himself with the partisans of social and intellectual emancipation, to his associates he must have appeared as committed and as unambiguous a humanist as any of them.

In January 1842 Stirner had already published two separate and rather more ambitious articles on the religious question. The first of these, in the Hamburg *Telegraf für Deutschland*, was a review of Bruno Bauer's anonymous book, *The Trumpet of the Last Judgment against Hegel, the Atheist and Antichrist*, in which Bauer had pretended to unmask Hegel as the arch-enemy of true religion, who had disguised his destructive purpose under cloak of demonstrating the ultimate reconciliation of philosophical reason and Christian faith. By expurgating the universe of mystery, above all by destroying human *fear* before the unknow-

able, Hegel had in effect announced himself as the enemy of the sacred, therefore of the divine, and of God. 'The Trumpeter' ironically called upon the truly pious to quit their slumbrous complacency, to terminate the 'diplomatic peace' between Christianity and philosophy, and to join immediate and mortal battle with the unregenerate rationalist and his godless followers. While in his faithful account of *The Last Trumpet* Stirner may have added nothing of his own to Bauer's arguments, this review, his very earliest published writing, shows him to have from the start endorsed the view that the essential purport of Hegelianism was atheistic and thus that the orientation imparted by the Hegelians of the Left was the fruitful and historically crucial one. His other publication, in the form of a pamphlet, appeared almost immediately after the review of Bauer's book, and also addressed itself to the conflict between reason and religion. This was his *Reply of a member of the Berlin community to the tract of the fifty-seven ecclesiastics, entitled 'The Christian Observance of Sunday': A friendly word to our laymen*, in which he advised anxious churchmen that public piety would decline even more disastrously until they started to preach a humanitarian religion from their pulpits. Instead of fostering social servility, moral anaemia, and mental cowardice, let the churches teach men to practise a rational ethic, to realize and reverence the humanity in themselves, and to live their lives freely and without fear. In this article, too, Stirner was doing little more than add his signature to the declaration of war already pronounced against Christianity by the Young Hegelians. Its genetic interest is to indicate with remarkable exactitude his philosophical starting-point, which it shows to have been firmly fixed in the secularistic concepts and ethical attitudes of a thoroughgoing but conventional humanism of almost exactly the kind he would have found readymade by Feuerbach.

Even in these earliest philosophical writings there are perceptible traces of the characteristic Stirner who was shortly to emerge. In the review of *The Last Trumpet*, for example, he describes the 'self-sufficiency of the free man', who brings down a whole world in his murder of God, and whose work of self-creation

cannot be distinguished from his work of destruction.[1] For every reference to the self-appropriation or the 'reckless and licentious will' of the sovereign individual,[2] however, there are twenty references to 'the truly and completely human' as constituting 'my best and true self,'[3] to 'the God within oneself,'[4] or even to 'morality and rationality' as the highest faculties of the free spirit.[5] For the philosophical voyage on which he was now embarking Stirner had to travel lightly, and his course may be checked by his progressive jettisoning of these redundant burdens—morality, social justice, reason, and humanity—which even at the start served only as ballast and which had to go overboard if he was to carry to its destination his purely personal freight—his absolute irresponsibility rooted in the ethical vacuum at the solitary centre of his identity, his choice of the destructive, the appropriative, and the exploitive in his relationships with others and the world, his self-enjoyment through self-creation and self-possession, in a word his nihilistic egoism.

His course is charted above all in the four major and independent essays which he wrote in 1842 and 1843. The two earliest of these appeared in the *Rheinische Zeitung*: the first, on 'The False Principle of our Education', occupied four supplements in April 1842, and the second, on 'Art and Religion', was published in another supplement in the following June. The other two, on 'The State Founded on Love' and on Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, were written for the *Berliner Monatsschrift*, which Ludwig Buhl had projected as early as July 1843, but which owing to the censorship was not published until 1845 and even then did not survive the first issue. It is almost certain, then, that the last of these four important essays charting Stirner's philosophical evolution was written by the early summer of 1843. He had totally ceased his more ephemeral journalistic activity by January of that year, when the *Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung* had been suddenly suppressed, and some time before July he must have decided to

[1] See *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften und seine Entgegnungen auf die Kritik seines Werkes: 'Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum'. Aus den Jahren 1842–48*, edited by J. H. Mackay, 2nd edition, Berlin, 1914, p. 19.

[2] See op. cit., p. 37. [3] See op. cit., p. 32. [4] See op. cit., p. 37.

[5] See op. cit., p. 43.

suspend all other literary work of any kind in order fully to release his energies for the task of writing *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*. Clearly, by the time he had written the last of these four decisive essays, he must have seen himself to be on the very brink of that total nihilism into which his immediate course lay to plunge.

In the very first of these essays, on 'The False Principle of our Education, or Humanism and Realism', Stirner had already begun to make notable and distinctive innovations.[1] Within the ambience of an educational theme, he succeeds in striking a note that echoes many of the richer chords later to be fully orchestrated in *Der Einzige*. Certainly, he still pays lip-service to the part of education in 'perfecting our community, our social life',[2]; it does this, however, not by 'producing *creatures*', but by 'forming *creators*'.[3] The domination of our environment, which he judges to be the valid essence of 'Realism', is still held to consist in apprehending its inherent dialectical processes by the purely logical procedures of formal abstraction; but we may detect a foreshadowing of Stirner's later doctrines of the egoist's 'appropriation' of his environment in his account of how the educational process requires the pupil to 'annihilate' the concrete material data by incorporating them into the invisible core of his self, and in his concept of the 'Will-Knowledge' which arises when inert knowledge is thus destroyed and transmuted into dynamic will.[4] In his ontological account of the pupil's selfhood Stirner still relies heavily on the Hegelian concept of 'Spirit'; he converts the Hegelian terminology to his own use, however, and systematically accentuates the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the pupil's 'Spirit', which frees itself from all external alienations, from all reverence for its surroundings, by converting these into mere alimentation for the pupil's growing individuality. He is still prepared to assign a specifically 'ethical' purpose to education;[5] but this 'ethical' purpose turns out to be the formation

[1] For a full account of the place of *The False Principle of our Education* in Stirner's thought, and of its relationship to his finished philosophy as stated in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, see *Max Stirner's Philosophy of Education*, by R. W. K. Paterson (unpublished thesis for the B.Phil. of St. Andrews University, 1962).

[2] See *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, pp. 237–8.

[3] See op. cit., p. 237.

[4] See op. cit., pp. 246–7 and 253–4.

[5] See op. cit., p. 256.

of 'sovereign characters', of individuals who are themselves 'principals' because they are without fixed principles, 'free persons' engaged in ceaseless dissolution and rejuvenation, whose freedom consists in perpetual self-definition and self-manifestation.[1]

The pupil-hero of 'educational personalism' is not yet a nihilist and not yet an egoist. Stirner was eventually to replace the freedom of the 'personalist' by the self-possession of The Unique One. He was to abandon such conceptions as 'Will-Knowledge' in favour of a pure will to which knowledge, like values, was an external element to be disregarded or to be seized and deployed without need or possibility of justification. Nevertheless, the 'free person', no longer merely an ethical fragment but already an existential totality, is in many respects an astonishingly precocious miniature of The Unique One. The vacuous, impenetrable self of the 'free person', who negates and consumes the world in the act of exploiting and enjoying it, is the embryo of that 'creative nothingness' in which the identity of The Unique One is centred and from which he emerges to disembowel and caress the physical and social universe in which he alights. The moment-to-moment existence of the 'free person', his sanguine instability and promiscuity, is already an advanced symptom of what was to develop into The Unique One's incurable rootlessness and levity, his perpetual re-creation through self-destruction. Stirner's educational essay is not yet a testament either of nihilism or egoism in the sense to which he was later to carry these concepts, but already his moral and social dissent has taken the form of a capricious individualism, and individualism is already equated with a life of unabashed and reckless self-affirmation.

Although it was actually written and published at an early point during his brief career as a topical journalist, throughout which, as we have seen, he appeared in the conventional guise of a committed social radical, in retrospect Stirner's essay on education clearly announces his advent as an independent critic who at one stroke has begun secretly to forge a new set of weapons designed for eventual use against his as yet unsuspecting comrades-in-arms in the radical and humanist camp itself. To his readers

[1] See op. cit., pp. 252–4.

among 'die Freien', however, Stirner's batteries must have seemed to be still mainly trained on the forces of conservative morality as their common enemy. This impression might well have been confirmed by the second of his important philosophical essays, on 'Art and Religion', which appeared two months later, when Stirner was at the very height of his activity as an avowedly radical journalist. For Hegel art, above all the 'spiritual' work of art, culminating in classical comedy, represented that necessary and maieutic stage in the history of the relationship between the human and the divine which inaugurates the final solution of their relationship, the solution proclaimed by the highest revealed religion, Christianity, in which the union of human and divine is accomplished in its purest form. Stirner replies that while the artist is the first to propagate human ideals by projecting the deepest human aspirations on to a concrete object, the work of art, religion, in its subsequent attempt to grasp the ideal object by converting it into an inner spiritual reality, succeeds only in draining the image of its sensual content, and eventually of all content.[1] The true result of religion is always alienation, with all its seductive agonies and exquisite deprivations. In seeking to embrace God, the believer is seeking to embrace his own shadow, for God is nothing but the vacuous reflection of a humanity which has not yet found itself, and the reflection will remain vacuous until philosophy succeeds in teaching men to recognize themselves and to place their hopes upon themselves.[2]

A fortnight before this essay of Stirner's, Bruno Bauer had published a pamphlet on *The Hegelian Doctrine of Religion and Art*, and it was only a matter of months earlier that Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* had appeared. Besides the traditional concepts of Young Hegelianism, with which Stirner is plainly working in this essay, the special influence of Feuerbach is discernibly present in his endeavours to dismantle the last remaining claims of religion to be a definitive re-appropriation of self-consciousness by itself and in his treatment of 'the divine' as the estranged and vapid parody of man's own nature. In retrospect, however, we can see how ominous Stirner's deepening interest

[1] See op. cit., pp. 258–60.

[2] See op. cit., p. 268.

in theology was to prove for his unwary allies on the Hegelian Left. His atheism was in the end to be not only a denial of God and of religion: it was to be a denial of philosophy also, and a destruction down to the last shreds of anything that a Feuerbach or a Bauer might seek to nominate in the place of God. In the essay on 'Art and Religion' it was as yet only man's expropriation to the divine to which he was determined to put an end. The despatch of 'humanity', 'rationality', and 'morality' to join the divinities was a major step he still had to take, but it was a direct one, and the basic work of clearance was already being done. The weapons of classical atheism were now his, even if for the moment he restricted his target-practice to the approved targets.

The third of Stirner's major formative essays, 'Some Provisional Ideas concerning the State Founded on Love', was almost certainly written in the spring of 1843, that is, shortly after he had ceased to give regular journalistic support to the public campaign of the Young Hegelians. Its point of departure was the famous memorandum in which, at the height of the Napoleonic conflict, the statesman von Stein had attributed Germany's débâcle to the political backwardness of the German people, and had urged popular representation as a matter of the utmost national expediency. That von Stein's constitutional proposals were never put into effect had been a constant source of regret and discontent among German liberals. Stirner reminds his readers, however, that the much-vaunted 'equality' of von Stein in any case never amounted to more than an equality of political *subjects*, who were merely equal *as* subjects under the immediate central authority of the Crown instead of under the mediate and diffuse authorities of feudal potentates, and that the 'liberty' of von Stein was never intended to be more than a moral liberty on the part of subjects conscientiously to perform their civic duties from a sense of civic loyalty.[1] The constitutional State envisaged by von Stein was in reality a State founded on the universal duty of Christian love, with liberty and equality merely representing two of the forms in which this love could be partially expressed in political life.[2] Stirner concedes that 'love', which at least forms active relation-

[1] See op. cit., pp. 270–2.

[2] See op. cit., p. 273.

ships of some kind with the external world of objects, is to that extent better than 'egoism', if this is understood as the state in which the individual is passively bound to the chance objects of his instinctive desires. Better than either the lover or the egoist, however, is the 'autonomous' man, governed by nothing outside himself, whose movements follow only the self-determining fiats of his own imperious will.[1] Stirner's criticism of 'The State Founded on Love' was not merely a criticism of Prussian monarchical theory. It was also a refusal of the Feuerbachian principle of human love as the supreme relationship in social life and, by implication, of the democratic theories advanced by liberal Young Hegelians like Arnold Ruge and Centre Hegelians like Karl Rosenkranz. The liberal State, itself above party and faction, but guaranteeing the constitutional framework within which political issues can be democratically settled, was from the standpoint of the autonomous individual no better than the existing autocracy. Civil liberties granted by an external authority, however 'representative', were as offensively constraining to him as the pious allegiances of any paternalist monarchy. Indeed, to the man in search of genuine autonomy, both the rule of law and the blandishments of social goodwill are if possible even more repugnant than candid coercion.

Thus for the first time Stirner is stating his implacable rejection, not only of the senile feudalism of Frederick William IV's Prussia with its crabbed laws and patronizing prerogatives, but of the very institution of 'the State', however democratic in form, and of the very concept of 'civic responsibilities', however equally allotted. In fact, the freer the State, the more inextricably captive its citizens. Still more significant in this essay, however, is Stirner's renewed fascination with the situation and character of the self-centred man. He still balks before the term 'egoism', but the 'autonomy' of which he prefers to give an account, as that state of the individual in which (instead of being passively absorbed by the objects of his desire) he actively draws into his own being the objects which his self-determining interest alone creates, is virtually a prototype of the condition of the egoist as he was to be

[1] See op. cit., pp. 275–6.

depicted in *Der Einzige*. If in *Der Einzige* he reserved the term 'egoist' for the man who has freed himself both from the reign of instinct and from the tyranny of fixed ideas, he had already depicted such a man in this earlier essay. As it neared completion, the portrait needed only to be named.

The second essay which Stirner contributed to the *Berliner Monatsschrift*, and his last writing before he gathered his forces for the composition of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, was his review of Eugène Sue's novel, *Les Mystères de Paris*. The celebrity of Sue's sentimental melodrama in the early 1840s is partly explained by its arresting plot and colourful personages; its peculiar fascination for contemporary intellectuals, however, was due to its circumstantial descriptions of the squalid and brutal realities of life among the criminal poor of Paris, and it was the supposed social significance of the book which drew the attention of such reviewers as Szeliga, in Bauer's *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, and Marx, in a characteristically turgid section of *The Holy Family*. Rudolf, prince of Gerolstein, having in a fit of rage drawn sword against his father, is smitten by remorse and seeks to expiate his sin by succouring the abject and the fallen in the darkest quarters of Paris. There he meets Fleur de Marie, his earliest love-child, whose existence has been hitherto unknown to him. Although Fleur de Marie, under the evil influence of The Owl, has been enticed into a life of prostitution, her essential innocence is still intact and she has not yet become enslaved by debauchery. The story revolves round Rudolf's attempts to rescue Fleur de Marie from her degradation, first by confiding her to the pious tuitions of a priest, and finally by returning with her to the court of Gerolstein, where he hopes to surround the new princess with the respect and admiration befitting her station and beauty. Fleur de Marie will have to buy her new happiness, however, at the cost of preserving a mendacious silence about her sordid past, and this price, despite the protestations of her dismayed father, she refuses to pay. The lessons of the priest have been too well learned. She refuses to compromise with her conception of her duty and, throwing herself on the mercy of God, prefers to withdraw absolutely from the world. Her ordeals, however,

have been too much for her: they will deprive her of her reason, and ultimately of her life. Rudolf bows his head before this catastrophic issue, in which he claims to perceive the inscrutable judgment of God, depriving him of a daughter in punishment of his original offence against his own father.

It is easy to see why this morality-tale provided Stirner with a golden opportunity to stage a carnival of moral cynicism. There is not a character in the book who is not a prisoner either of his own weak nature or of some intrusive ideology. As a prostitute, Fleur de Marie was at least her own mistress, accountable to no one: her self-loss dates only from the moment when she dedicated herself to the fulfilment of a religious and moral duty.[1] Stirner divides the characters of the novel into two equally contemptible categories: those, like the insouciant Rigolette or like the malignant little cripple, who are constitutional mediocritics, incapable of any kind of evolution because their way of life is no more than the blind result of their animal temperaments; and those, like Rudolf himself or like the satanic Mother Martial, whose iron fanaticism in the cause either of virtue or of vice reveals them to be equally the slaves of a despotic principle.[2] Eugène Sue is too parochial to conceive a man who might be 'superior to virtue as well as vice, to morality as well as sin',[3] 'a character of steel' who has the nerve to live as 'a self-made man, fabricating his own identity from his own creative power in reckless disregard of both instinct and belief'.[4] Such a man would immediately see through the fraudulent conventions of a society whose moralists judge an individual by the virtues he has to his credit just as its bankers judge him by the cash he has to his credit.[5] Liberal morality, like liberal economics, is the product of a mean and calculating spirit. To the self-made man, who refuses to submit his merits or shortcomings to the reckoning, the whole arbitrary distinction between 'virtue and vice, morality and sin' is nothing but a futile obsession, an enfeebling *idée fixe*, and of it he makes a public and wholesale mockery. Stirner's self-made man, in short, is the settled and confident amoralist.

[1] See op. cit., p. 288. [2] See op. cit., pp. 289–91. [3] Op. cit., p. 288.
[4] Op. cit., p. 289. [5] See op. cit., p. 286.

His review of *Les Mystères de Paris*, with its cool assumption that moral principles and social ideals, of any and every kind, can at last be safely consigned *en masse* to the midden of dead and unmourned superstitions, announces Stirner's arrival at the threshold of that nihilistic egoism which it now became his purpose to elaborate and define; and it marks the end of his unperturbed process of self-discovery. By its indictment of Rudolf, whom Szeliga had hailed as the paradigm of the 'pure critic', it also marks the effective end of Stirner's honeymoon with the Bauers and their philosophy of sovereign criticism. And in fact, by his declaration that 'true morality and true piety are never to be wholly separated, for even the atheistic moralists are in reality worshipping Goodness, Truth, and Virtue as their Gods',[1] he is declaring his secession from the whole tribe of social critics, political utopians, moral reformers and all the other earnest humanitarians and philanthropists, by whose radicalism and militancy he had once been attracted, but with whose self-forgetful zeal he had now lost both sympathy and patience. From this point onwards Stirner would have to move alone, for he had now left even the hardiest of his fellow-travellers irrevocably behind him.

By the early summer of 1843, then, Stirner had to all intents and purposes extricated himself from the coalition of social and intellectual progressives under whose auspices he had begun his philosophical career. If he was still generally regarded as an assiduous Young Hegelian, this was a pardonable error but a gross one, which he would once and for all remedy in the following year when he published his catalogue of the vices and follies of Young Hegelianism from Feuerbach downwards. By the time he wrote the last of his major philosophical essays he had fixed the axis of his moral universe, and could now turn his attention to depicting, with a wealth of detail, its structure, its contours, and its ingredients. Thus his whole philosophical evolution, from his original liberal humanism to his ultimate nihilism, occupied only a period of at most eighteen months. To the historian, the seeds of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* were visibly germinating

[1] Op. cit., p. 282.

as early as April 1842, in his essay on 'personalist' education, for it was then that he first adumbrated the lawless and irresponsible figure who was finally to take shape as The Unique One; although for eight months after that decisive essay he continued to support the public cause of radical humanism with apparently undiminished vigour. It was not until his review of Sue's book that he shed his residual ambiguity, but from the start it is possible to detect those catalytic elements in his thinking which by their subsequent fusion would produce that complex and coherent metaphysical configuration which represents his culminating philosophical project.

Stirner's descent was clearly sharp and deep. His rapid passage from spirited commitment to egoistic detachment, from revolutionary idealism to nihilistic cynicism, was perhaps therefore dramatic enough to illuminate, by its example, the pattern of collapse sometimes experienced by the moral radical who finds his passionate dissent decompose into a nerveless disillusion. In Stirner's case, we have the spectacle of a man initially professing two themes, an abrupt individualism and a rapacious scepticism, either of which on its own might have been harnessed in the service of a profound moral concern or of some notable social purpose, for the extreme individualist and the thorough sceptic may well make a creative, perhaps a unique contribution to the advancement of the most significant human causes, particularly where the cause is one involving moral or intellectual liberty. In Stirner's case, however, a singularly truculent individualism was from the start irrigated by an explosive scepticism which would not rest until it had dissected and discredited every cause which reason or history could propose; reacting organically on each other, these two turbulent elements, by an irresistible internal alchemy, transformed what had been an intense political and cultural engagement into a callous and self-centred frivolity, from within the ark of which he could subsequently write, 'Away then with every cause which is not wholly and entirely my cause!'[1] His scepticism, infusing all of his early journalistic writings but perhaps given its clearest philosophical application

1 D.E., p. 14.

in the essay on 'Art and Religion', moved along a continuous line from the iconoclasm of the Young Hegelians in general and the 'sovereign criticism' of the Bauers in particular, until it terminated in the nihilistic indifference of *Der Einzige*. It was his individualism, throughout extravagant, from its first defiant appearance in 'The False Principle of our Education' to its more systematic expressions in the essays on 'The State Founded on Love' and on *Les Mystères de Paris*, which throughout distinguished him from the main body of philosophical radicals, with their social or other collective interests, and which was finally to bring him to the massive egoistic solitude in which he was thenceforward to be and to own himself. Thus from January 1842, given his drive to intellectual destructiveness and moral self-sufficiency, it could be surmised that he would plunge, step by cynical step, ever more deeply into the abyss of nihilistic egoism which had seemed from the outset to beckon him. Leaving the clash of social and political battle on the vaporous plains above, and with scarcely a glance behind him, he traced a rapid and undeviating path until, secure at last from protest or interruption, he found himself at the bottom of the abyss where the only echoes to be heard were his own.

CHAPTER IV

DER EINZIGE UND SEIN EIGENTHUM

By the summer of 1843 Stirner had completed his philosophical stocktaking and was ready to render his account. One by one, he had appraised each of the dissident movements of the time—liberal humanism, philosophical socialism, and the philosophy of pure criticism—and had found each of them infected by an ultimate compromise. Whether owing to a failure of nerve, or to some basic astigmatism, the Feuerbachs and the Bauers had all stopped short of the crucial point; at the last moment they had admitted the presence of some transcendent object in the scheme of things—not indeed a 'God' in the sense of a personal deity, but a 'Humanity' or a 'Society' or a 'Morality', all of which were as fictitious, and as autocratic in their claims upon the individual concrete human being, as any personal God had ever been; and thus the programme of atheism still remained to be carried through to its conclusion. This was the task to which Stirner now applied himself, and at which he laboured throughout the long winter of 1843–4. He had probably finished the main draft by May of 1844, in July or August he made his final corrections, and in November *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* was published in Leipzig.[1] Having taken less than two years to work his way through the major solutions proposed by the principal philosophies of dissent, testing and discarding them one after another, he needed only a few short months for the congenial task of stating his own alternative, displaying its implications, and demonstrating its logical and metaphysical immaculacy.

In *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* Stirner had really only one

[1] The latest work quoted in the text of *Der Einzige* is volume 5 of the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, which appeared in April 1844. Although Stirner refers in footnotes to volume 8 of the same journal, which appeared in the following July, we have his own testimony for the fact that he had finished the main draft of his book before then.

idea to express: in the words of his introduction, 'Nothing is more to me than myself!'[1] Throughout hundreds of pages it is this one theme, the theme of egoistic self-possession, which is stated and restated, illustrated, annotated, and defended, with inexhaustible patience, vehemence, and lucidity, and to which, after numerous lengthy digressions, he always returns. Although it does not constitute a formal and schematic deductive system, the book is from start to finish a self-consistent, seamless unity. As Arvon justly puts it: 'If one searches in vain for a rectilinear development, one is all the more surprised to find an extremely rigorous concentric development. If the ideas do not succeed each other according to a determinate logical order, they are nevertheless ceaselessly deepening as they unfold. The same ideas return at later stages, enriched in meaning.'[2]

Although, then, it would be idle to seek a formal demonstrative structure, the work does nevertheless follow a general plan, loosely adopted for presentative purposes. It is in two Parts: the First, 'Man', developing the concept of alienation and exposing the mendacity of all the ethical and theological pretenders to authority over the concrete sensuous individual; and the Second, 'I', tracing the egoist's progressive reappropriation of himself as he subdues these impostors and converts them into the docile tenants of a reconstructed universe designed according to his own specifications. In the First Part, Stirner describes anxious 'realism', intrepid 'idealism', and calm egoism as the three stages in the development of 'A Human Life', and as the three eras in the culture-history of the 'Ancients and Moderns'; in the sub-sections entitled 'Spirit', 'The Possessed', and 'The Hierarchy', he reviews the forms in which the transcendent and its agents attempt to subjugate human beings and emasculate men's consciousness; and in his criticism of 'Die Freien' as the last of 'the Moderns', he subjects 'Political, Social, and Humanistic Liberalism' successively to a philosophical analysis which reveals them to be severally and compendiously the last impotent twitch of a finally moribund idealism. In the Second Part, Stirner contrasts the maturity of the

[1] D.E., p. 14.

[2] H. Arvon, *Aux sources de l'existentialisme: Max Stirner*, Paris, 1954, pp. 42–3.

Table of Contents from the German Reclam Edition of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*

Der Einzige und sein Eigentum

Inhalt

	Seite
Ich hab' Mein Sach' auf Nichts gestellt	11
Erste Abteilung: *Der Mensch*	
I. Ein Menschenleben	17
II. Menschen der alten und neuen Zeit	24
1. Die Alten	24
2. Die Neuen	34
§1. Der Geist	38
§2. Die Besessenen	45
§3. Die Hierarchie	81
3. Die Freien	117
§1. Der politische Liberalismus	117
§2. Der sociale Liberalismus	138
§3. Der humane Liberalismus	147
Zweite Abteilung: *Ich*	
I. Die Eigenheit	183
II. Der Eigner	202
1. Meine Macht	217
2. Mein Verkehr	245
3. Mein Selbstgenuss	374
III. Der Einzige	424

egoist and his project of 'Self-Possession' with the degeneracy of Spirit and its meretricious ideal of liberty; he goes on to depict himself in the role of 'The Proprietor', and to exhibit the shortcomings of the political, social, and humanistic liberals viewed in comparison with 'My Power', 'My Intercourse', and 'My Self-Enjoyment', the three dramatic idioms in which the egoist acts out his role; until in the last chapter of the book 'The Unique One', 'in whose person the proprietor returns to his creative nothingness', stands forward in his full identity as 'the finite, mortal creator' who perpetually consumes his own being and

whose watchword, at the end as at the beginning, is: 'I have made Nothing my cause!'[1]

Der Einzige is compulsively readable. Stirner throughout treats the German language as his plaything, with which he is endlessly prepared to play a roguish and violent game of his own invention. His style, direct, vivid, and economical, has a terseness and candour which cuts like a new knife through the turgid and obscure verbosities which characterized so much of the writing of his neo-Hegelian predecessors. Its seeming simplicity, however, often disguises an extravagant and almost malicious linguistic subtlety which at times has the effect of making whole passages virtually untranslatable. He is a master of the skilful and expressive paronomasia, of the artful and illuminating neologism. He transacts disconcerting exercises in etymology, resurrecting usages which ingeniously match the case he wants to make. He brazenly imports terms of foreign derivation, however remote in original meaning from their German homonyms, whenever their assonance opportunely favours the paradox he is in process of stating or the polemic he is in process of conducting. Everywhere he is conscious of the suggestive depths of language and avid to exploit their untapped possibilities. 'I have had to fight', he says, 'with a language which the philosophers had corrupted, which the devotees of the State, of religion, and of every kind had abused, and which had become capable of limitless confusion.'[2] The German language, like the concepts of Hegelianism, was for Stirner an inheritance to be commandeered without regard to the testamentary conditions of its devisors or scruple for their intentions, but with regard only to its potentialities as an instrument in his own hands and for his own purposes. If he coolly chose to adapt his language for the most bizarre and often scandalous purposes, at least none of his readers could deny that in his hands it was employed with a devious resourcefulness and labyrinthine erudition which marked its employer as a linguistic adventurer unique in the history of German philosophy.

'I have made Nothing my cause!' In the introduction which is

[1] See D.E., p. 429.

[2] *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, p. 413.

headed by this manifesto Stirner throws down the gauntlet to all the causes and ideals which have ever enthralled men in their service. I am supposed to embrace 'the good cause', or God's cause, or the cause of humanity, or of justice, or truth, or freedom. I am told that my cause should be the cause of my king and country. From the philosophers I learn that I should toil humbly in the cause of Spirit. The one cause that is forbidden to me is my own cause: the egoist is an object of universal horror. But when we take a closer look at these principalities and powers in whose cause we are summoned to labour without protest and to sacrifice ourselves without question, what do we find? We find that, claiming the obsequious service of all, they themselves claim to serve only themselves, and it is universally assumed that they will be of service to nothing and no one but themselves. Does God enrol himself in the service of Truth or Love? We are told that such a question is absurd as well as impious, for God is himself Truth and Love, and in fulfilling his own decrees he is necessarily fulfilling the requirements of Truth and the commandments of Love. 'He himself serves nothing higher and pleases only himself. His cause is—a purely egoistic cause'.[1] For the progress of Humanity individuals and whole nations, who have burned themselves out in its cause, are thrown on the rubbish-heap of history; no one thinks this ungrateful, for it is universally assumed that Humanity is in itself a sovereign and self-justifying cause. Thus Humanity, like God, and like all the other glorious ideals which coerce or debauch the individual, is a colossal and shameless egoist. Let us profit by their example. 'For my part', says Stirner, 'I shall take a lesson from them and, instead of continuing selflessly to serve these great egoists, will play the egoist myself. . . . Away with every cause which is not wholly and entirely my cause! Do you think that my cause must at least be "the good cause"? Good and evil indeed! I am my own cause, and I am neither good nor evil. . . . My cause is neither the divine nor the human, it is not the true, the good, the just, or the free cause, but simply *mine*, and it is not anything general,

[1] D.E., p. 13.

for it is—*unique*, as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself !'[1]

The First Part of *Der Einzige*, bearing the general title 'Man' and in length amounting to about two-fifths of the book, opens with a brief parable called 'A Human Life'. Stirner describes how the child, seeking to locate and recover himself amid the chaos of his experience, at first finds himself thwarted on all sides by the refractory world of natural objects. It is only when he learns to find the weak points in his environment that he manages to penetrate it, to 'see through' it, and thus to find an opening for his own power. The rod loses its terror, when behind it the child can discover his own defiance; the strict father loses his power to strike awe, when behind him the child can insert his own cunning. But what is this courage, this imperturbability, this guile, which we can insinuate behind all obstacles, so outwitting them? 'What else but—Spirit !'[2] We first identify ourselves as Spirit, and as Spirit, cleansing things of their mystery, we come to despise the natural world, because we have become its superior. When he has reached adolescence, the boy concerns himself no longer with things, but only with the ideas behind and implicit in things. The youth desires only to live in the abstract realm of pure thought and to regulate his conduct according to the dictates of pure reason. But 'purely logical questions are equivalent to theological questions',[3] and the result of his ambition is that, having found himself as Spirit, he loses himself once again, this time to the divine ideal of spiritual perfection, for only a transcendent God is *perfect* Spirit. Just as the child had to struggle against his physical environment, so now the youth finds himself struggling against the dictates of his own conscience, which communicates to him the austere values of that world of absolute ideals which he both fears and envies. It is not till he becomes a grown man that 'he takes the world as he finds it, instead of . . . trying to model it on his ideals; that he forms the resolute judgment that one must deal with the world, not according to one's *ideals* but according to one's *interests*'.[4] The man is more mature precisely because he is 'harder, less magnanimous, more self-

[1] D.E., p. 14. [2] D.E., p. 18. [3] D.E., p. 20. [4] D.E., p. 21.

seeking'.[1] Disdaining bodily concerns, the youth found himself as Spirit, only to lose himself before the ideal of perfect Spirit: it is left to the man to find himself definitively and to seek the satisfaction of 'the whole fellow'. Behind the natural world the youth found the world of values and pure ideas: the man at last finds *himself* behind these values and ideas 'as their creator and owner',[2] who can destroy them the moment they aspire to establish an authority of their own. The child, says Stirner, was 'realistic', trapped by the world of things; the youth was 'idealistic', obsessed by the world of thought; only the mature man can be 'egoistic', disposing of thoughts and things according to his whim or self-interest. 'Finally', he asks, 'what about the dotard? It will be time enough to answer that when I have become one.'[3]

Chapter 2 of the First Part, on 'Ancients and Moderns', occupies the whole of the rest of this Part. In the first brief section Stirner proposes two alternative accounts of the breakdown of the world-outlook of 'The Ancients'. The classical Greek posture, we are told, was one of reverence and awe before the vastness of the material universe and the mystery of family and communal bonds. This conception of man as a powerless creature facing an imponderable destiny in an alien universe was first shattered by the Sophists, who boldly exhorted men 'not to let themselves be bluffed'[4] and to use their native ingenuity, their *understanding*, to win for themselves a secure and agreeable life. The liberation of the understanding had to be completed by a purification of the *heart*, however, if human intelligence were not to become an instrument of men's vicious and irresponsible appetites, and this work of moral education was undertaken by Socrates, 'the founder of ethics', whose historic achievement it was to purify the heart of all its worldly ambitions and desires. This progressive emancipation of man from Nature came to its logical conclusion in the philosophy of the Sceptics, who purified the human heart so completely that it finally stopped beating: whereas the Sophistic culture had produced an understanding which was stopped by nothing, the Sceptical philosophy ended by producing a heart which was moved by nothing.

[1] D.E., p. 22. [2] D.E., p. 22. [3] D.E., p. 23. [4] D.E., p. 26.

Stirner proceeds to offer an alternative (and, in Hegelian terms, a more orthodox) account of the Ancients' consciousness of themselves and their relationship to reality, based this time on the development of Stoicism into Epicureanism, but terminating once again in Scepticism. What the Ancients originally sought, he maintains, was a secure wellbeing, which differed from the life of gross sensuality only in degree, even when it took the form of a 'renunciation' of life. The indifference and composure of the Stoics were still ways of coping with *the world*, of seeking a possible mode of self-assertion against the world; even the gentle hedonism of the Epicureans was explicitly advanced as a 'worldly wisdom', which attempted to frustrate Nature by deceiving it. The rupture of consciousness from the world was accomplished only by the Sceptics, who declared reality to be devoid of objective value or truth and who reduced good and evil, beauty and ugliness to mere predicates, representing no more than the subjective and fluctuating concepts of the human imagination. Thus the philosophy of the Ancients ends in 'the ataraxy and aphasia' of the solitary Sceptic. This is the point, says Stirner, when the Ancient gives place to the Modern, when paganism yields to Christianity, the terrestrial to the heavenly. If solemn and inexorable Nature was for the early Greeks all in all, by the end of Graeco-Roman civilization its philosophers had withdrawn wholly into Spirit, within which men were thenceforward to live, spurning the 'vanity and transitoriness' of the world and seeking at first consolation, and finally salvation, within its sheltering walls. But the man who lives only in and for Spirit, caring nothing for worldly vicissitudes or the needs of this life, is already the Christian.

Having shown how Ancient civilization thus turns upon itself and in the end destroys its own chief ingredients, Stirner goes on to diagnose the characteristic obsessions and morbid delusions of 'The Moderns', in the lengthy second section of Chapter 2. He begins by tracing an almost exact parallel between the evolution of the Ancient relationship to Nature and that of the Modern relationship to Spirit, as this is exemplified in the history of Christianity. The Middle Ages, sunk in captivity to dogma, were

liberated by the sophisticated 'Understanding' of the Renaissance in the period immediately preceding the Reformation. Taking the medieval abuses 'to heart', Luther purged the European heart of ossified dogma, but in so doing he unleashed the forces of pitiless 'criticism', which were finally to criticize Christian love and compassion out of existence. The 'critical' purification of Spirit, eventually replacing the active affection for men of flesh and blood by a purely theoretical concern for the abstract idea of 'Man', is still essentially a '*theological* revolution', but it is the revolution which finally evacuates Spirit of all its living content, leaving it a bare activity of perpetual self-examination.

Having adumbrated the ideological life-history of 'Christianity' in this typically ingenious vignette, Stirner now devotes a short sub-section to the definition of 'Spirit' in and for itself, since it is to the self-fulfilment of Spirit that the whole of the idealistic or Christian phase of human history tends. 'Spirit' can only be defined as the creator of the 'spiritual world', the world of thoughts and ideals, which propagates itself in total abstraction from the natural world of physical reality. Spirit generates itself from nothing, just as thoughts are generated by the thinker, who does not yet exist, however, as a 'thinker' until he has generated these thoughts. The suicidal fallacy of the 'believer', who admits an internal scission between himself and his beliefs or values, is to hypostatize the latter, to attribute to his ideals a higher and transcendent existence, and to prostrate himself before them as their humble servant, sacrificing all his other interests to the demands of Spirit. Even when a Feuerbach wrenches the ideal from its transcendence, he tries to induce men to press it to their bosoms and recognize it as their own true nature—although it is precisely because we are *not* to be identified with Spirit that we think of it as transcendent in the first place. Only the egoist, recognizing thoughts and values as his own creations and refusing to subordinate his carnal to his spiritual interests but pursuing either as it pleases him, can succeed in evaluating and asserting himself as a unity. The egoist refuses to identify himself with any 'higher being', whether transcendent or immanent. 'I am neither God, nor Man, nor the Supreme Being, nor My

Essential Being, and in the end it is all one whether I conceive of this Being as within me or without me.'[1]

In the next sub-section, entitled 'The Possessed', Stirner goes on to describe the condition of the modern 'believer', for whom the natural world is one great phantasm, the shifting phantom-body of omnipresent Spirit. To the believer, even his own body represents nothing more than an empty semblance, owing its brief significance to the ghost inhabiting it. Many believers indeed, like the Christian who accepts temporal humiliation for the sake of ultimate salvation, are in practice 'involuntary egoists', whose devotion to a 'higher cause' is in fact little more than a circuitous and unconscious devotion to their own wellbeing. The devotion of the unconscious egoist to his 'higher cause' is too unswerving, however; he fails to grasp that we are not 'tied to the past hour', that we do not have to prattle today merely because we prattled yesterday, that we surpass ourselves every instant, leaving our old selves behind us, and that we can change our identity and our projects at any moment, since we are 'creatures' only to the extent that we ourselves are our own creators.[2] The unconscious egoist, like other believers, is too busy trying to find some kind of reality for 'the Supreme Being', that ubiquitous ghost. Among Christians, the project of making Spirit comprehensible, of literally 'realizing the non-sense', produced the doctrine of the Incarnation, the most incomprehensible doctrine of all; and if the conscious egoist, the non-believer, will prize you because he likes you or needs you, among humanists you *yourself*, as a concrete, sensuous individual, will count for nothing, because in you they will only see and prize the ghostly essence of a fictitious 'Humanity'. In truth, modern society is from top to bottom one great lunatic asylum, and the human race, almost without exception, are its demented inmates, the willing victims of their own fixed ideas, which they will flee to protect, with hysterical venom, against anyone rash enough to suggest that they are nothing but illusions. The one sane man is the conscious egoist, who recognizes in the concept of 'the Supreme Being' the paragon and archetype of everything held

[1] D.E., p. 44. [2] D.E., p. 48.

'sacred', who further recognizes it to be sacred merely but inevitably because it is inherently alien to any true concrete individual and who can therefore 'smile compassionately at the whole struggle' over its supposed nature and location.[1]

The modern 'freethinker' is every bit as mad as the Christian. As we can see from cases like that of Proudhon, who speaks of 'the eternal and absolute moral law, which no one would dare attack', religion has not disappeared: it has merely changed its skin.[2] If 'the Supreme Being' is no longer located in a personal God, this is simply because it is 'Morality' which is now the sacred object, requiring men's veneration and exacting their obedience. In dissolving 'God' as a subject while leaving 'divine' as a predicate, Feuerbach likewise was leaving religion essentially intact. 'He might have left the tinsel, since in any case he left the doll.'[3] All that the freethinkers offer us is a new religion, a religion of morality, in which self-neglect, altruism, and the suppression of our private appetites are once again enrolled to mortify and confine the unhappy individual. They preach a morality fit perhaps for wan virgins whose lifelong self-denial has left them with no company but their own arid bitterness or dreary lassitude. 'O Lais, O Ninon', exclaims Stirner, 'how well you did to scorn this pale virtue. One free *grisette* against a thousand virtuous old maids!'[4]

Granted that self-denial is the essence both of religion and of morality, what is it that makes a given concern of mine 'unselfish'? Stirner answers that when a concern ceases to be *my* concern, my *property*, to which I can remain icily indifferent at the same time as I pursue it with all the vigour and skill at my command; when *it* conscripts *me* in its service so that I say, 'Here I stand, I can do no other'; then a blind fanaticism has possessed me for its own separate purposes and I have ceased to be and own myself. Just as the Christian may have appetites, but must not allow himself to be possessed by his appetites: so the conscious egoist will have ideas, values, and concerns, but he will treat these as no more than his playthings and possessions, which he will chastise or discard the moment they threaten to ossify into any-

[1] See D.E., pp. 50–1. [2] D.E., p. 59. [3] D.E., p. 72. [4] D.E., p. 76.

thing resembling the sacred ideals by which the virtuous and the pious permit themselves to become so intoxicated.

In a third sub-section, entitled 'The Hierarchy', Stirner concludes his account of the consciousness of 'The Moderns'. 'Hierarchy is the dominion of thoughts, the dominion of Spirit',[1] the glad subjection of the Christian, by whose act of subjection alone the world of 'the sacred' comes into being. If world-history falls into three great eras—the 'Negroid' era, centring on the high cultures of Egypt and North Africa, the 'Mongoloid' era, beginning with the Huns and ending with the Russians, and the 'Caucasian' era, which has just opened; then the first of these (corresponding to 'Antiquity') may be said to mark the age of 'dependence on things', the second (corresponding to 'Christianity') marks the age of dependence on thoughts, and only with the definitive arrival of the third will both forms of bondage be dissolved. For our latter-day Mongols, the not-self is a hard diamond, an immovable substance about which they can bustle but which they can never destroy or consume. Showing an almost Chinese veneration for *the positive*, founding their morality on custom, they seek to erect the realm of thoughts, concepts, and ideals into a new heaven, a 'culture-heaven'. Their archpriest is Hegel, whose speculative conversion of things into thoughts represents the climax of Mongol philosophy, and in Hegel's declaration that 'the real is the rational, the rational the real' we find the culmination of that whole movement, beginning with Luther's 'He who believes is a God' and typified by Descartes' 'Cogito ergo sum', which claims that only in thought (or in faith) is reality to be found. Just as Descartes, with his faith that the ideas of the intellect are underwritten by the integrity of God as their guarantor, is the classic exemplar of the 'theological' attitude to knowledge; so Hegel, that great Lutheran, for whom reason (or holy 'Spirit') is to be found everywhere and in all things, perfectly expresses the Protestant's relationship to the world. The Christian may have revolted against *things* in all their bruteness and particularity, but his revolt takes the form of 'annihilating' things only by conceptualizing them. He may

[1] D.E., p. 89.

betray his government, abandon his family, and reject the morals of his society, but he venerates all the more fanatically the ideas of 'government', 'the family', and 'morality' in general, and if he repudiates the priesthood it is only to become his own priest. The Christian mind undoubtedly culminates in Protestantism, which vanquishes the profane by *hallowing* it, and which ends by declaring marriage, the family, morality, and the State to be *intrinsically* sacred. The walls of that 'Church Invisible', the sacred, will continuously expand, to enclose more and more of experience in ever widening circles, until the sanctuary itself is rushed and taken. Only when you have violated the charmed circle, 'when you *consume the sacred*, can you make it your *own*! Devour the holy wafer and you are rid of it!'[1] Mongolism will only yield when the true Caucasian, the egoist, dissolves Spirit and brings it to nullity, stepping forth with the declaration: 'I am proprietor of the world of things, and I am proprietor of the world of Spirit.'[2]

Meanwhile, however, the last of the Mongols have still to be exposed, namely those pseudo-Caucasians who profess to be 'heaven-stormers' when they are really seeking only to build a *better* heaven. These thinkers seek to bring the Holy Spirit as near to men as possible, and in so doing give birth to the idea of 'the spirit of humanity'. They are the most modern of 'the Moderns', for they are 'Die Freien' or 'The Liberals'.

Stirner's section on 'Die Freien' is again divided into three large sub-sections, the first of which is devoted to 'Political Liberalism'. The political liberals are essentially the apostles of the bourgeois class, the representatives of that 'Third Estate' which in 1789 constituted itself as the sole Estate—in fact as *the* State, without rivals or limitations. They are the 'political Protestants', who want to abolish the noble and clerical Estates mediating between the individual and his sovereign, just as religious Protestantism abolished the ecclesiastical intermediaries between the individual soul and God. However, just as the 'religious liberty' of Protestantism required an even stricter because more direct submission to the laws of God, so the 'civil liberty' of Liberalism entails an

[1] D.E., p. 117. [2] D.E., p. 81.

infinitely stricter subjection to the laws of the State. Although the old sovereign, with all his prerogatives, has vanished, the new sovereign, the State, is a thousand times more powerful than the old. The bourgeoisie have created the first *absolute* sovereign, against whom individuals can have no rights other than those bestowed by the sovereign himself. From now on the State is all in all. In declaring the 'equality' of all citizens, the State is merely announcing that it has no regard for persons as such: individuals count as nothing before its laws. In promulgating the 'freedom' of all citizens, the State is merely intimating that it will brook no violence against persons by other private persons: violence may only be done to the individual in the name of the laws. Civil liberty, like religious liberty, 'does not signify *my* liberty, but the liberty of a power which rules and coerces me . . . *its* liberty is *my* slavery'.[1] The rule of law is supposed to be the rule of reason: 'but if reason rules, the *person* succumbs'.[2] While a revolution may liberate a *people*, or bring liberty to men as *citizens*, no political revolution can set free the *individual*, and thus the French Revolution merely overthrew one establishment to replace it by another—the bourgeois establishment, the State. Imbued with the principle of mediocrity, 'the golden mean', fearing equally the licentious extravagance of the aristocracy and the irresponsible vagabondage of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie eschews both Birth and Labour as principles claiming to govern society and weakly professes a muddled compromise between them, for what does Capital represent if not inherited wealth fructified by the labour of employees, 'a little heredity and a little labour'?[3] And what motive do the proletarians have to revere the authority of a 'State' invented by capitalists to protect the interests of capitalists? In the name of the proletariat, concludes Stirner, the socialist will agitate for the destruction of the capitalist 'State' and its replacement by a workers' 'Society', composed of men who are *economically* free and equal.

The following sub-section, on 'Social Liberalism' begins by stating the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, which the socialist asserts to be the theoretical equality of men as 'persons'

[1] D.E., p. 127. [2] D.E., p. 126. [3] D.E., p. 135.

simultaneously with their actual inequality in respect of property, and which he seeks to resolve by abolishing personal property and placing all property in the impersonal and impartial hands of Society. 'Let us do away with *personal property*. No one will have anything any longer, and everyone will be—riff-raff'.[1] If in the bourgeois State the dignity of men consisted in their equality as 'citizens', in communist Society their dignity consists in their 'existing for each other', that is in serving each other, in labouring for each other, and since all socially useful labour is homogeneous in value, all labourers are equal and will be rewarded equally. 'Grasp fortune!' is the watchword of the capitalist, who regards commerce, politics, science and every other human activity as a legitimate field for the ingenious speculator. It is, however, precisely 'free enterprise', that game of chance bringing arbitrary misery to the workers, which the socialist wants to abolish and to replace by co-operative labour within the protective framework of a planned social order. While the bourgeois extends to all the *opportunity* to acquire unlimited spiritual and material goods, the communist imposes on each the *obligation* to acquire them, under approved conditions and in return for work. And of course it is from this concept, the concept of a universal and total obligation to society, that Stirner records his vehement and uncompromising dissent. This 'Society' is just one more weary fiction, it is simply our newest would-be lord-and-master, in short it is nothing but the latest incarnation of that hoary phantasm, 'the Supreme Being'. 'That society is merely an instrument or means from which we extract our own advantage; that we have no social obligations, but only interests, our pursuit of which society must serve; that, far from owing a sacrifice to society, if any sacrifices are to be made we sacrifice the latter to ourselves: none of this the socialists suspect, because—as Liberals—they are imprisoned by the religious premise and yearn to found a Society which they can worship as sacred.'[2]

Stirner concludes his critique of 'Die Freien' with a long subsection on 'Humanistic Liberalism'. Humanistic or 'Critical' Liberalism rejects both the bourgeois consciousness and the

[1] D.E., p. 139. [2] D.E., p. 146.

proletarian consciousness as intolerably narrow and exclusive, rising as they do from the selfish class-interests of property-holders and producers. Its ambition is to strip away every peculiar characteristic limited to a particular group, thereby liberating our essential and universal humanity; thus Jews, for example, must forget their distinctive Jewishness if they are to share as free equals in a purely human community of consciousness. But for Stirner, 'if you are indeed more than a Jew . . . you are also more than a "human being": whereas these are mere ideas, you are a physical reality';[1] Jewishness and humanity are *already* qualities of *yours*, to be owned and enjoyed like all your qualities, assets, and powers; you do not have to forfeit your Jewishness in order to realize your humanity, for you already instantiate them both fully. To the socially useful labour of the communists the humanistic liberal opposes 'humane' labour, which is wholly disinterested, and which finds its paradigm in the purely theoretical work of intellectual criticism, destroying prejudices, shattering all limits, and thereby acting as midwife to a completely general and therefore purely human self-consciousness. To 'humane' creativity, however, Stirner in turn opposes the creativity of the artist, who, even when apparently expressing himself with the utmost universality in a painting or symphony, *is* nevertheless always and uniquely expressing *himself*. 'You say indeed that you are revealing Man. But the man you reveal is yourself.'[2] The great artist is distinguished from the humble craftsman, not because his work reveals 'man' more perfectly, but because the particular man it reveals is a uniquely greater man.

The relentless war waged by 'Criticism' against every manifestation of exclusiveness or separateness expresses in its final and sharpest form the age-long battle fought by Spirit against egoism. In the concrete sensuous individual who cannot be 'criticized' away, the Critic will at last encounter the one immovable object, the impenetrable core which resists conceptual dissolution because it transpires to be no mere philosophical concept, but an actual living reality. 'For *I*, from whom I start, am not a thought, nor does my essence consist in thinking. Against me,

[1] D.E., p. 150. [2] D.E., p. 157.

the unnamable, the realm of concepts, thought, and Spirit is shattered.'[1] Whereas the Critic 'wants to dissolve thoughts by means of thought, I say that only thoughtlessness truly saves me from thoughts. Not thought, but thoughtlessness—I myself, the unthinkable and incomprehensible—will restore me to possession of myself. A jerk does me the service of the most careful thinking, a stretch of the limbs frees me from the torment of thoughts . . .'.[2] At least Criticism has taught me this unforgettable lesson: that if anything becomes fixed and implanted in me, if I allow any one of my interests to become stable and domesticated, I am enslaved—until I have once again 'dissolved' it. 'In order to secure my property, therefore, I continuously take it back into myself, annihilate its every movement towards independence, and swallow it before it can crystallize itself into any kind of established principle.'[3] Hypnotized by their fetish of absolute liberty, the Critics fondly imagine their activity of pure criticism, 'Criticism criticizing itself', to be perfectly presuppositionless, innocent even of its earlier presupposition, 'Man'. Nothing could be further from the reality, for Criticism in fact makes the most brazen presupposition of all, resting as it does from beginning to end on its own perennial activity, its indefatigably mobile and questioning self-consciousness, as its perpetually given and wholly unquestioned presupposition, as a kind of travestied Substance on which every critical act depends. By contrast, Stirner exclaims, '*I* start by presupposing myself . . . a presupposition which I exist by consuming, for as The Unique One I repudiate the dualism of a presupposing and a presupposed self . . . rather, I *posit* myself or *create* myself, existing only in the act of positing myself moment-by-moment, as creator and creature in one.'[4]

The Second and longer Part of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* bears the simple and confident title, 'I'. It opens with the chapter on 'Self-Possession', in which Stirner offers a characteristically militant account of this key concept. He is here in fact primarily concerned to contrast the self-possession of the resolved and conscious egoist with the humanistic ideal of social and intellectual

[1] D.E., p. 175. [2] D.E., p. 175. [3] D.E., p. 168. [4] D.E., p. 178.

freedom, and to show that, whereas 'freedom is devoid of content',[1] self-possession fixes one's attention on those concrete, substantive interests which are the very stuff of one's identity. To be 'free' is always merely to be free *of* something, merely to be 'rid of it', but 'although one can become rid of much, one can never become rid of everything'.[2] The thirst for freedom can never be satisfied, for the freer we become the more conscious we become of new constraints, and yet freedom *cannot* be partial, it *must* be entire, if it is to *be* 'freedom'. But why chase the—unattainable? The 'inner freedom' preached by the Stoics may indeed be invulnerable to the vicissitudes of fortune, and doubtless I can enjoy such inward freedom even as a slave; but such freedom is no more than a 'phantasmal' freedom, and 'the fetters of reality will cut the sharp st weals in my flesh at every moment'.[3] In the closest confinement, however, even under the most appalling tortur s, I can always remain entirely 'my own', true to myself and in complete possession of myself. So long as in the very act of cringeing before my tormentor I think of nothing but myself and my own advantage, he is powerless to affect my self-possession. Whereas my freedom can at any moment be taken from me, I alone can alienate myself, can allow another being or another cause to possess me. Prizing only myself, starting from mys lf and my own interests, I may use any means available to realize these interests—persuasion, compulsion, petitioning, hypocrisy—and clearly 'if I am weak, I shall only have weak means'.[4] 'Who has not diss mbled loyalty before the sheriff's officer? . . . He who has not done so, has let violence be done to himself: he has been the true weakling—from conscience.'[5] I may bid my time, therefore, but I do not give myself up. My self-possession r mains intact, and I can never lose myself, so long as I do not give myself away. Thus the egoist, instead of vainly hunting the illusory ideal of perfect freedom, will be content to accept such additions to his actual freedom as reflect the actual increase of his power which he accomplishes from the inalienable base of all his power and property—his ind structible property in himself. 'Self-poss ssion, how ver, being no mere

[1] D.E., p. 184. [2] D.E., p. 185. [3] D.E., p. 186. [4] D.E., p. 195. [5] D.E., p. 195.

idea, does not measure itself against any alien standard, such as freedom, morality, humanity, or the like: it is strictly a description of—the proprietor himself.'[1]

With this Stirner arrives at his chapter on the character and interests of 'The Proprietor', the central chapter of the book and by far the longest. 'The proprietor' is of course none other than Stirner himself, as he projects himself into his final metaphysical identity. Before expounding the three idioms in which he enacts his role, however (in the three sections on 'My Power', 'My Intercourse', and 'My Self-Enjoyment'), he devotes some preliminary pages to a renewed attack on the pretensions of contemporary humanism. 'The religion of Humanity', he tells us, 'is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion',[2] the last and most insidious form of alienation. By erecting one of my qualities, my humanity, into a self-subsistent principle with apodeictic authority over me, the humanists are in effect endeavouring to make me a slave to what should really only be a casual part of my property. Because 'Humanity', to which it demands universal deference, is bound to be the most general unifying principle of any community, the religion of Humanity is the *State-religion par excellence.* The State typically takes cognizance of its members only in their most general capacity, as *men*, while for the 'Un-man', the egoist, who is 'inhuman' just as he is indefinable by any quality or relationship, it reserves its most implacable suspicion and hostility. The State knows that 'against the egoists so-called Human Society is wrecked',[3] for egoists enter into relationship with each other, not as 'men', but as an I and a Thou irreducibly distinct from and opposed to each other. 'I sacrifice nothing to society, I only exploit it . . . by transforming it into my property and my creature, by annihilating society and forming in its place *the association of egoists.*'[4] Does this mean, in the words of Fichte, that 'the ego is everything'? Stirner replies that 'it is not so much that the ego *is* all, as that the ego *destroys* all, and that only the self-dissolving ego, the never-being ego, the *finite* ego—is really me.'[5] Only *I*, 'this transitory ego', am real; 'the human race' is merely a fiction, a conceptual

[1] D.E., p. 201. [2] D.E., p. 206. [3] D.E., p. 209. [4] D.E., p. 210. [5] D.E., p. 213.

wraith. I refuse to have value conferred upon me in my trivial character as 'human'. I refuse to have power conferred upon me in the specious form of 'the rights of man'. 'My power *is* my property. My power *gives* me property. I myself *am* my power and through it I am my property.'[1]

Stirner immediately proceeds, in the section entitled 'My Power', to annotate this conception of 'power', as the fluctuating, ceaselessly ebbing and surging periphery which marks the tentative limit, but never the final definition, of the egoist's protean identity. 'What you have the *power* to be', he asserts, 'you have the *right* to be. . . . I am *entitled* to everything which I have in my power.'[2] The distinction between power and 'right' is the distinction between the unique, instantaneous reality of the dynamic individual and the abstract, oppressive spirit of a ghostly 'society' which seeks to be omnipresent in its pious surveillance over its members. All right, however, is alien to me, except the right which I award myself, the right which I *am*. Neither a wise man nor a fool, neither King, Pope, nor people can place me 'in the right', since 'there is no right outside me; if it is right *for me*, it is right . . . as for others, that is their worry: let them look after themselves'.[3] Communists like Babeuf may claim that 'Nature' entitles me to certain basic rights, 'but Nature cannot entitle me—i.e. empower me—to what I am entitled only by my *act*'.[4] Communists claim, for example, that equal labour entitles a man to equal enjoyment, whereas 'only equal enjoyment really entitles you to equal enjoyment'.[5] If you succeed in *appropriating* the fruits of Nature, they are *yours*, and you have 'done all right'; otherwise, 'it serves you right'. In short, the whole concept of 'eternal, inalienable rights' is *religious* to the core, the egoist will ignore them except where they happen to coincide with his interests, and he will devote his whole attention to realizing these by skilfully concentrating and opportunely expanding his ceaselessly extempore *power*.

The rule of right in society is given by the Law, which professes to be fundamentally opposed in its nature to the arbitrary decrees of a capricious will, but which is no less a declaration of will, even

[1] D.E., p. 217. [2] D.E., p. 221. [3] D.E., p. 222. [4] D.E., p. 222. [5] D.E., p. 223.

if it is the considered declaration of the general will, and which does no less violence to the ascendant self-will of the refractory individual. Even if everyone expressed the same will as I, am I supposed to acquiesce in government by this 'general will' which is theoretically my own, when the result would be to freeze or fossilize my self-will, binding me today to my will of yesterday? 'Wretched stability! My creature, namely a certain declaration of will, would have become my master, while I, the creator, would be hindered in my flow and dissolution. Because I was a fool yesterday, am I doomed to remain one my life long?'[1] Even laws which were expressly designed to facilitate my free self-development and individual creativity would be wholly impertinent to my condition, for my first and last demand is to be the sole originator and owner of the actions in which my identity is realized. Since egoistic self-will and respect for the authority of society necessarily collide, therefore, 'the self-willed egoist is necessarily a criminal, and his life is necessarily crime'.[2] This does not mean that he will lead a life of petty thieving (although he will certainly not be deterred from this by a superstitious respect for property). But it does mean that he will 'practise the most pitiless desecration', since 'nothing is sacred to him'.[3] Because 'crime' is essentially the defiance of what is held sacred—the defiance of property, of the family, of religion, the State, or mankind—it means that the egoist, to whom nothing is sacred, is by his very existence the most tireless, the most impenitent criminal. If, in his own interest, the egoist will realistically appraise and acknowledge the power exerted by other individuals, he will acknowledge nothing in them corresponding to 'merit', nothing which invests them with 'right' or 'authority'; for the authority of the universe itself is set at nothing by the slightest exertion of his own power, even when this simply takes the form of closing his eyes and stopping his ears.

As Stirner sets out to show in the next section, which sprawls over the central three-fifths of this long chapter, my power receives its fullest expression and meets its most commensurate challenge in the domain of 'My Intercourse'. Once again,

[1] D.E., p. 229. [2] D.E., p. 236. [3] D.E., p. 215.

Stirner finds the chief obstacle to my unrestricted intercourse, just as it was the most relentless enemy of my self-seeking power, in the ghostly rule of those secular churches, 'the people', society, and the State. The freer the people, the more helpless the individual. When the Athenian people was at the height of its freedom, it banished atheists, created the institution of ostracism, and poisoned its most honest thinker. (If Socrates—like that other fool, Christ, but unlike the astute Luther—did not use his power to escape, this was simply his characteristic weakness, his delusion that the people was his judge instead of his enemy: his 'virtue' amounted to treason against himself.) 'A people', says Stirner, 'represses those who raise themselves above its own majesty.'[1] Therefore let the bells which, as he writes *Der Einzige*, are tolling to celebrate the German people's one thousand years of continuous history, let these bells instead toll to celebrate the imminent departure of the German people to enjoy its eternal rest. 'Soon the peoples, thy sisters, will follow thee. When they have all followed thee, then humanity itself will be in its grave, and I will be my own, I will be the laughing heir!'[2]

The German word for society, 'Gesellschaft', is derived from 'Saal', meaning a hall which encloses many persons. Individuals, however, may be *in* a hall without any intercourse taking place between them, since intercourse takes place between *me* and *you*, without any reference to a *third* party. In modern society, it is not so much you and I who use the hall as the hall which contains or holds us—just as a prison society is determined by a place, the prison, which defines the way of life of its inmates as 'prisoners' and decrees the relationships which may obtain between them, but which prohibits *intercourse* or *association*, since these would jeopardize the security of the prison. Similarly, the State is an order of dependence, a hierarchy indissolubly established against us egoists. Like its predecessors—the sun, the stars, crocodiles, Allah, Jehovah, Christ, the Church—it masquerades as a 'moral, mystical, or political person', even sometimes having the temerity to pose as my 'true self', and so seeks to lead me away from myself and to make me worship this phantom outside and above me.

[1] D.E., p. 252. [2] D.E., p. 253.

'The State does let individuals *play* as freely as possible, only they must not be *in earnest*, they must not forget *it*.'[1] I am not to do everything of which I am capable, but only what the State approves; I am to be a scientist, a literary critic, a smoker, only if the State approves. Some States profess to grant more freedom than others, 'but *I* am free in no State'.[2] Poor Edgar Bauer wants a State in which the executive has its foundation in the people as the sole authority, not understanding that a 'people' is an utterly fortuitous and artificial concourse temporarily and specifically assembled under the direction of some arbitrary political superior—in contrast with *my* unique and irreplaceable reality, for I can and must be only this particular definite I. Do the Nationalists want a united German people, do they really want all the swarms to congregate in one beehive? The egoist has no such wish, nor does he occupy himself with the State and its affairs from a sense that citizenship is his 'sacred duty', although he may take an interest in political events if they tend to follow a course which happens to affect his interests. Otherwise, he will merely say to the State: 'Get out of my sunlight.'[3]

To take pride in being a German—or in being human—is to value oneself by one's relationships, rather than by one's exclusiveness. Nationalists and humanists rightly distrust each other, for both are captives of an illusion which is only removed when both 'German' and 'human' are re-established where they belong, in company with all my other qualities, which only have reality so long as I instantiate them and which equally depend on my always unqualified and remote uniqueness. The egoist may enter into provisional relationships with others: he will interest himself, however, only in those concerted activities which promote *his* ends, since for what other ends should he endure the fatigues of association? Always pragmatic, he can never, therefore, be truly partisan. If he joins a party, he does not thereby bind himself to its principles or ideals, but continues his strictly meted support only up to the moment when it has ceased, on balance, to further his clear purposes: when the moment to abandon ship inevitably comes, it finds him prepared with all his possessions to take to his

[1] D.E., pp. 263–4. [2] D.E., p. 263. [3] D.E., p. 272.

private lifeboat. He realizes that to attach oneself on grounds of principle to any one group, whether a tiny group of philanthropists, a party, a nation, or the human group itself, is to submit to the rule of an alien master which always expresses 'discontent with the *present* man'[1] and which always ends up by setting up for its adherents an arbitrary ideal of perfection, to realize which then becomes one's overriding 'vocation'. The group tries always to place me 'at the standpoint of *should*',[2] it always seeks 'to make something out of' me which I *am not*.[3] This is the 'religious' price of involvement, which the egoist, disclaiming all vocation, calmly refuses to pay.

The critical point at which the group attempts to assert its ascendancy over me is in respect of the claims which it makes over my property. As the self-appointed guardian of property, the State arrogates to itself the 'right' of defining the conditions under which private property is legally to be held, while the view of an anarchist like Proudhon, that private property is 'theft', plainly entails the idea of absolute property rights vested in some Supreme Proprietor, presumably Mankind itself. *My* property, however, in any meaningful sense must be what I have the *power* to use or abuse, what I *am able and choose to* dispose of as I please, exclusively and without limit; in short, I do not distinguish between 'property' and stark *possession*. On the religious principle of universal human love the Communists want to abolish my personal property in favour of a mode of distribution which would benefit the incompetent and needy at my expense. Not only a Communist society, however, but *any* society gains its existence at my expense. The State in fact exists by 'using me up', by 'turning me to account', by attempting to convince me that I am 'worthless' in myself.[4] Under the imposed system of so-called 'free enterprise', the State insists on mediating between entrepreneurs and ensuring that competition only takes place between them within declared limits: it will not, for example, allow me to seize my competitor by the hair. But, says Stirner, 'what I want, I must have',[5] and I shall certainly enjoy whatever I have the strength or cunning to *take*. 'Here egoism,

[1] D.E., p. 283. [2] D.E., p. 282. [3] D.E., p. 283. [4] D.E., p. 296. [5] D.E., p. 300.

self-seeking, must decide.'[1] No one else will give me my value 'unless I realize value from myself'.[2] My value cannot be 'earned' by 'service', and it cannot be measured in the base coin with which the Communists would reward the homogeneous stints of 'general human labour', because—unlike a stint of 'general human labour', which could be done by anyone on my behalf—*my* labour is the irreplaceable labour of a 'unique one'. No one else could paint *my* pictures, or compose *my* songs, any more than some paid mechanic could have deputized for Raphael. *My* labour cannot be paid at 'the rate for the job'. Only I can establish its value, and my self-evaluation is identical with my limitless activity of appropriation and enjoyment.

Stirner now turns to consider another, and more insidious, form in which the jealous group seeks to alienate me from myself and to expropriate me from what I have made my own. The group attempts to impose on human intercourse the highest and most exemplary religious commandment of all, the commandment of *love*. Love is supposed to be my 'vocation', and I am supposed to be 'called', by God or by my essential humanity, to love others and sacrifice myself for their sake. Now, while I certainly do sometimes sacrifice particular enjoyments for the sake of another in whose person I happen to take joy, to sacrifice *myself* for his sake would be to hand myself over to my passion, to allow *it* to possess *me* instead of my dominating and disposing of it. And while I certainly 'love' certain others in the sense that I occupy myself intimately with their needs and concerns, and take a personal pleasure in their pleasures, this egoistic love of mine, to which I elect them only because and so long as it is my humour to do so, is very different from altruistic or romantic love, which is supposed to be reserved for those who, in virtue of some special qualities, are thought to have a rightful claim on my affections. The egoist recognizes no one—neither family, compatriots, nor 'fellow-humans'—to whom his affection is owing as of inherent right, and no one—neither benefactors nor companions—to whom it is owing as a matter of fitness or desert. If there were another to whom my love was *owing*, then 'my love,

[1] D.E., p. 300. [2] D.E., p. 297.

which tolls for him, would be in reality *his* love, which he collects from me as his toll'.[1] 'My love is *mine* only when it is *egoistic*, when its object is really . . . my property, to which I owe nothing and have no obligation, any more than I have obligations to my eye—which I nevertheless cherish with the greatest care, but always only on *my* account.'[2]

The egoist, therefore, does not consider himself obliged to love the world. 'I do not love the world, for I *annihilate* it, as I annihilate myself: I *dissolve* it . . . I *utilize* the world and men! Thus I keep myself open to every impression without being sundered from myself by any of them. I can love . . . without taking the loved one for any more than the *nourishment* of my passion . . . for any more than *the object of my love*, which my love *uses* . . . thus I only *utilize* him: I *enjoy* him.'[3] Nor does he write his book out of love for its readers. 'No, I write to procure for my thoughts an existence in the world', and would do so 'even if I foresaw that these thoughts would destroy all your peace of mind forever'.[4] Like Goethe's bird in the carefree branches, the egoistic writer enjoys in his own creativity the only reward he seeks or needs. 'I sing—because I am a singer. But I *use* you in all this because I need ears.'[5] The egoist regards you as his 'fodder', and in turn expects to be the object of your egoistic appetites, since from his perspective all relationships ultimately resolve into the only authentic natural relationship—that of exploitation, of individuals by each other. 'When the world crosses me,' says Stirner, 'I consume it, thereby to appease the hunger of my egoism.'[6]

Moral or social unity, then, in the sense of participation in a relationship to which one's whole self is committed, is for the egoist the classic form of self-alienation or self-betrayal. Every kind of social relationship constitutes a latent threat to my self-possession, and '*self-possession* I will never surrender'.[7] The lesson for the egoist is that he must create his *own* relationships, that is, relationships which derive their entire meaning from the projects which he invests in them and which survive as vessels of his

[1] D.E., p. 343. [2] D.E., p. 343. [3] D.E., p. 346. [4] D.E., p. 346.
[5] D.E., p. 347 [6] D.E., p. 347. [7] D.E., p. 359.

enterprise only so long as they continue to bear his cargoes securely and economically. To any pragmatic, exploitive relationship of this kind Stirner gives the name of 'association'. 'The association' is my *product*, my own creature, to which I am hence infinitely superior and to which it would be accordingly absurd for me to acknowledge obligations. 'Neither a natural nor a spiritual bond binds the association', in which 'I see nothing but a multiplication of my power and which I preserve only so long as it remains *my* multiplied power.'[1] Whereas in the natural collective like the family, or in the spiritual collective like the nation, you are merely a 'specimen' or a 'member', 'in the association alone you can assert yourself as *unique*, because you possess it, never it you.'[2] Whereas in the State I only hold my property subject to the laws, the very existence of an association is subject to my evaluation of its performance as the hired broker of my property. Whereas in society I am 'put to use', in an association I 'make myself count'; whereas society expects me loyally to discharge my social duties, I utilize every association and 'abandon it faithlessly' when there is no more advantage to be extracted from it; whereas society sets itself up as a sacred object existing independently of me, an association exists only for and through me and is at all times *mine*; in short, whereas society always attempts to consume me, I always grow by consuming the association to which I temporarily belong.[3]

Let us reject 'community', concludes Stirner, 'let us not aspire to community, but to *one-sidedness*'.[4] 'Over the portal of our time stands, not the "Know-thyself" of Apollo, but "Get the value out of thyself!" '[5] The egoist does not, of course, attempt to realize his value by 'revolution', which as a social act merely substitutes one form of expropriation for another; but by his personal 'insurrection', which leaves the established order standing for him to elevate himself above it. The insurrection is essentially an egoistic purpose and deed. Jesus Christ, that notorious insurgent, took care to 'render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's' and counselled his accomplices to 'be as wise as serpents';

[1] D.E., p. 365. [2] D.E., p. 365. [3] D.E., pp. 366-7.
[4] D.E., p. 364. [5] D.E., p. 369.

and precisely because he coolly ignored the prevailing order, 'straightening himself up' and *utilizing* it as a context, he was its most deadly enemy and ultimate annihilator.[1] What Christ was to the pagan order, therefore, the egoist is to the Christian order. Egoistic intercourse with the world aims at appropriation of the world, at its conversion into the pabulum of my personal enjoyment, since 'for me no one is a person to be respected . . . but solely an *object* . . . an interesting or uninteresting object, useful or useless'.[2] All powers, all others, exist only as 'materials for my enjoyment', which I appropriate by consuming.[3] The world may be imperfect and still serve perfectly well for my enjoyment, because in the end 'my intercourse is my enjoyment of the world, and belongs to my—*self-enjoyment*'.[4]

With this Stirner closes his long section on 'My Intercourse' and introduces the section entitled 'My Self-Enjoyment', the last of the three sections into which he divides his vast chapter on the character and occupations of 'The Proprietor'. What, for the egoistic proprietor, is 'enjoyment'? Stirner's answer is that 'enjoyment of life means using life up'.[5] If I am my own property, I can use myself as I use property, I can enjoy myself by 'squandering' myself, I can live by 'dissolving myself and living myself out'.[6] If I am my own property, I shall ignore the Christian call to forgo my present enjoyment in order to seek my 'true self', I shall spend myself as I please in this life and refuse to hoard my possibilities in order to make a down payment on an 'eternal life', since I shall refuse to treat my life as something 'sacred' or as something which I 'owe' to God or to my fellow-men. If I am my own property, I shall refuse to divide myself from my 'true self' and I shall reject every attempt to submit me to a 'vocation destiny, or task', since 'a man is "called" to nothing and he has no "station" or "duty", any more than a plant or an animal has a "vocation".'[7] While I certainly have talents, capacities, or powers, 'to use his powers is no man's *vocation* or duty, precisely because it is his *act*, real and extant at all times: power is only a simpler word for the manifestation of power'.[8] Thus I always use as

[1] D.E., p. 372. [2] D.E., p. 365. [3] D.E., p. 373. [4] D.E., p. 374.
[5] D.E., p. 375. [6] D.E., pp. 375–6. [7] D.E., p. 382. [8] D.E., p. 383.

much power as I possess, and I always *am* as much as I *can be*. Far from aspiring to myself as a goal, I take myself as my starting-point, and to say that I start out from myself is to say that I accept myself purely as I am, without fear and without reproach. Indeed, the scale of my delinquency against those 'fixed standpoints', the Christian and humanitarian ideals, is generally a fairly accurate measure of my self-possession and self-enjoyment. These, along with all other ideal worlds and ideals of human nature, as obstacles to my enjoyment of myself and the world, must be thrown on the refuse-heap to which the conscious egoist swiftly consigns all rhe metaphysical and moral garbage that schoolmasters and priests, the confused and the obsessed, are forever trying to foist upon him.

As long as I remain my own, I can never suffer alienation to an ideal, for there is no alien power so hollow as the alleged power of thoughts. 'One only needs know how to "put everything out of mind", if only to be able to---go to sleep.'[1] Although I certainly want to *have* thoughts, I also want to be able to remain 'thoughtless'. 'He who cannot rid himself of thoughts is to that extent still *merely* a man, still the slave of that human institution, language', and after all the activities of reflection and discourse proceed only 'by your becoming thoughtless and speechless every moment'.[2] This consciousness of his instantaneous power to destroy the thoughts which displease him is the mark of 'the proprietary thinker'. The proprietary thinker also realizes that, just as everyone stands in a different relationship to any given object, an object is to each one 'what he *makes out of it*'.[3] Of course a Christian, for example, will claim that the Bible proclaims the same message for all men, but this means no more than that he wants to make *his* relationship to the Bible the 'true' one. The proprietary thinker knows that 'how we toss things about is a matter for our *option*, our *freewill* . . . our *heart's pleasure*',[4] so that 'what a man is, he makes out of things: "as you look at the world, so it looks back at you" . . . and therefore the things and their appearance are not first, but I am, my will is . . . I

[1] D.E., p. 391. [2] D.E., p. 405. [3] D.E., pp. 392–3. [4] D.E., p. 393.

determine what I will seek. . . . I choose for myself what I please, and in choosing I show my arbitrariness'.[1]

'In "the realm of thoughts" Christianity has been brought to its final consummation.'[2] In the Hegelian system of 'absolute thought' spiritual tyranny makes its last and most desperate attempt to dispossess the individual by condemning every private judgment as absurd and every private interest as wicked. 'Absolute thought', however, 'is nothing but that thinking which forgets that it is *my* thinking . . . that it only exists through *me* . . . that it is only my judgment, which I can at any moment *change*, i.e. annihilate, take back into myself, and consume.'[3] Thus the deadly enemy of idealistic absolutism is '*proprietary* thinking, *my* thinking, a thinking which does not lead me but is directed, continued, or broken off by me at my pleasure'.[4] Whether his thoughts coincide with those of a Christ or a Hegel, a liberal or a communist, will be a matter of total indifference to the proprietary thinker. From now on they are his 'creatures', and so remain as long as they are obedient to his choice: 'they are all disposable, my disposable property, and are annihilated as they are created by me'.[5] Thoughts do not fly around free like birds, but are always the chattels, the *utensils*, of some particular, concrete *thinker*. 'Truths are men's thoughts, expressed in words and therefore just as extant as other things', they are 'phrases, forms of speech, words—when brought into connection or into an articulate series, forming logic, science, or philosophy', but always 'nothing but words'.[6] The proprietary thinker adopts and utilizes *truths*, which are 'nourishment for my thinking head, as potatoes for my digesting stomach or a friend for my sociable heart', but '*the Truth* itself is dead, a corpse; it is alive only in the same way as my lungs are alive—as the measure of my vitality'.[7] If, due to my carelessness or impotence, a truth wriggles from my grasp and sets itself up over me, this is what constitutes its *untruth*. Subduing thoughts and making himself 'at home with them', the egoist *enjoys* thoughts as he enjoys things. 'Their truth is you—the nothingness which you are for

[1] D.E., p. 394. [2] D.E., p. 396. [3] D.E., p. 398. [4] D.E., p. 397.
[5] D.E., p. 419. [6] D.E., pp. 406–7. [7] D.E., pp. 414–15.

them and in which they dissolve: their truth is their nothingness.'[1] Hence 'your thoughts are my thoughts, which I dispose of as I will . . . without waiting for authorization . . . for how I deal with them is *my affair*'.[2] Hence thinking is like any other activity, which 'you can give up when the humour for it wears off',[3] since nothing is worth your attention for its *own* sake. And hence 'I, when I criticize' (unlike those Critics who test a thought for its truth in the way that a dog smells a man to find its master) 'do not even have myself specifically before my eyes, but am only . . . amusing myself according to my taste; according to my need I chew the thing up or only inhale its odour'.[4] The philosophical egoist, who has philosophical enjoyments, will therefore proceed in philosophy as he proceeds everywhere else, and will conduct his thinking according to the logic of his whim. Is this a rule, or a licence, for Stirner's readers to deal with his book according to *their* tastes? Clearly the only answer Stirner can give is that 'I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego: I am unique . . . and everything about me is unique . . . this is the meaning of The Unique One'.[5]

The long circuit describing The Unique One and his Property has now been completed, and requires only to be sealed by the short peroration, dedicated to the figure of 'The Unique One' in and for himself, with which Stirner closes his book. Stirner has shown how pre-Christian civilization, striving to find and dwell in 'holy Spirit', culminated in indifference to reality and contempt for the world, while Christian civilization, striving to accomplish 'the transfiguration of matter', is destined to end in a rejection of the ideal and in 'contempt for Spirit'.[6] By its very nature the contradiction of real and ideal *cannot* be resolved, at least not 'until one annihilates both'.[7] The Ancients piously desired 'holiness', which the Stoic 'wise men' sought to attain by purifying themselves of all worldly taint, while the Moderns have passionately desired 'corporeity', which they have sought to attain in a long series of projects, beginning with the attempt to incarnate holiness in the figure of Christ and ending with the

[1] D.E., p. 414. [2] D.E., p. 400. [3] D.E., p. 408. [4] D.E., p. 412.
[5] D.E., p. 423. [6] D.E., p. 424. [7] D.E., p. 424.

attempt to incarnate the ideal of 'Humanity' in the physical reality which is *me*. Significantly, the great preoccupation of Christianity has been to demonstrate God's existence: the history of Christianity is the history of its search for 'existence, corporeity, personality, reality'.[1] The attempt to find a form of existence for God has given way to the attempt to find a form of existence for the attribute of 'divinity', and that in turn has now given way to the search for a 'purely human' form of existence. But, says Stirner, 'no idea can have reality, for none can achieve corporeity'.[2] Although they followed opposite paths, both Christianity and Antiquity were ultimately directed by the same obsession, their obsession with *the divine*. Whereas Antiquity had attempted, and failed, to locate the divine in 'the extra-mundane', Christianity, having succeeded in projecting divinity beyond the world and time, was immediately smitten by a yearning to 'redeem' the world which had been forsaken and so came eventually to seek the divine in the sphere of 'the intra-mundane'—inevitably to fail, for 'the divine as *intra-mundane* can never really achieve identity with *the worldly itself*', which for the Christian always retains its incurable residue of 'the sinful, the irrational, the contingent, the egoistic'.[3] The last, doomed attempt to realize the ideal is that which brings the idea of 'Man' on the stage, which wants to make Man the 'ego' of history and history the 'body' of Man, whose members are we individual human beings, possessing value only as parts and having a role only within the total evolution of the species. This fantasy of humanistic evolution is as pathetic as the fantasy of Christian incarnation. Humanity, says Stirner, as an ideal must hover voicelessly in the impotent phantom-world to which Christianity has already been consigned, there to fade into nothingness with the cock-crow at which I stretch my living and palpable limbs. For the question about concepts, 'What is Man?', I shall therefore substitute a question about a person, 'Who is the Man?', to which the only answer is, 'I, this Unique One, am he', and with this question and this answer, if you like, the ideal of 'Man' finds its only possible realization.

[1] D.E., p. 425. [2] D.E., p. 425. [3] D.E., p. 427.

'It is said of God: "Names name Thee not." That is true of me: no *concept* can express me, nothing that can be put forward as my essence can exhaust me; they are no more than names. Likewise it is said of God that He is perfect and is not required to strive after perfection. But that is also true of me.

'I am *proprietor* of my power, which I therefore am when I recognize myself as Unique. In *The Unique One* the proprietor returns into the creative Nothingness from which he issues. Every higher being above me, whether God or Man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness but begins to pale before the sun of this self-consciousness. If I make myself, The Unique One, my cause, then my cause is this transitory, mortal Creator who lives by consuming himself, and I may say:

'I have made Nothing my cause.'[1]

The publication of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* excited an immediate and violent reaction. A tremor ran through the whole literary and philosophical world, erupting with astonished indignation at those points most sensitive to the impact of Stirner's tumultuous iconoclasm. The parties most aggrieved by his incontinent desecration of their ideals were from the start the most irascible in expressing their mortified displeasure, which they lamely strove to conceal behind unconvincing affectations of amusement or contempt. Thus in March 1845, in the *Norddeutsche Blätter für Kritik, Literatur, und Unterhaltung* (the official organ of Bauer's 'Critical' school), Szeliga diagnosed the arrival of The Unique One as merely another, and the most recent, phase in the progressive self-definition of the sovereign self-consciousness, whose task it now became to purge itself of this accretion by its attested method of critical analysis. This task can be lightly discharged, for Stirner's Unique One is already a barren and indeterminate abstraction: he can be rapidly despatched to join all previous phantoms of the intellect, for he is himself 'the phantom of phantoms'. From Feuerbach, in the second volume of *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift*, came the expected accusations that Stirner's conscious egoist, who 'loves' another

[1] D.E., p. 429.

only because and so long as the other represents to him a means of selfish enjoyment, thereby cuts himself off from the most noble and rewarding of human experiences; and that the egoist who 'loves' another merely for his private use thereby sacrifices his higher nature to his lower, his whole self to a part of himself, so forfeiting, in his ignorant greed, the precious possibility of complete fulfilment. And in July 1845, after consultation with Marx and Engels, Moses Hess issued, in his own name but on behalf of German socialists, a pamphlet entitled *The Last Philosophers*, in which he held Stirner's 'association of egoists' to be nothing new, since all societies up to and including modern bourgeois society (which receives its idealization in Stirner) have been nothing but egoistic associations formed to enable the exploitation of the many by the few.

To these three critics, who together represented the principal parties affronted by his synoptic profanation of contemporary German philosophy, Stirner published a composite reply, 'Stirner's Reviewers: A Rejoinder to Feuerbach, Szeliga, and Hess', in the third volume of *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift* of 1845. In this long article Stirner took the opportunity, not only to expose the confusions in his opponents' interpretations of his ideas and to rebut their criticisms, but also to elaborate and extend his own positive views in fresh and illuminating ways. To Szeliga, Stirner replied that as a concept 'The Unique One has indeed no content', because 'with him all conceptual evolution comes to an end'.[1] 'The Unique One is an expression of which it can be said with all honesty and candour that it expresses—Nothing.'[2] But it is idle to complain that 'The Unique One' is an empty phrase. No phrase, no predicate, can encompass the inexhaustible being of the unique individual, who, because he is unique, must forever elude definition or limitation. 'Someone who calls you Ludwig does not mean any old Ludwig, but *you*, for whom he lacks a word. What Stirner *says* is a word, a thought, a concept; what he *means* is no word, no thought, no concept. What he says is not what he means, and what he means cannot be said.'[3] 'Thus you are without predicates, as you are without determina-

[1] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 346. [2] Op. cit., p. 347. [3] Op. cit., p. 345.

tion, without vocation, and without laws.'[1] Since the irreducible contingency of *this* individual cannot be subsumed under any general category, there is plainly no cause for surprise that his incomparable reality should baffle language and defeat conceptualization.

To Feuerbach, Stirner replies that there are no interesting or valuable experiences accessible to the unselfish man which are denied to the egoist, except the experience of self-denial itself. It is the self-denying lover, not the egoistic lover, whose experience of love becomes drained of interest for him, in proportion as his love becomes a 'disinterested' one. An unselfish interest is no *interest*, since what is interesting or valuable can be so only through my interest in it and valuation of it. The 'sacred', that which I am expected to serve for its own sake and irrespective of my personal interests, is thus absolutely uninteresting, and in fulfilling its claims upon me I should be doing the opposite of fulfilling *myself*. The egoist may engage in many activities for many reasons: for example, he may work for the pleasure of working, for gain, or to support another whom he loves; he will never work, however, because he considers it his 'sacred duty' to do so. Likewise, he may love; but he will never love because the loved one 'deserves' or 'is worthy of' his love.

Hess also, like Feuerbach, equates 'egoism' with a pinched and arid mentality, with 'isolation' and 'poverty of interests'. 'He who loves someone is in respect of this love richer than another who loves no one', replies Stirner, 'but this in no way represents a contrast between egoism and non-egoism.'[2] 'Egoism, as Stirner employs the term, is not opposed to love, nor opposed to thought, it is no enemy of a sweet love-life . . . neither is it an enemy of Criticism, or of socialism, in short it is no enemy of any *genuine interest*: it excludes no interest. It is only directed against disinterestedness and the uninteresting: not against love but against holy love, not against thought but against sacred thought, not against the socialists but against the devout socialists.'[3] How can Hess declare that the only personal and social relationships of interest to the egoist will be those which enable him to practise the

[1] Op. cit., p. 348. [2] Op. cit., p. 374. [3] Op. cit., p. 375.

most widespread and brutal extortion, when in fact it is equally probable that he may prefer to savour the exquisite charms of a tender affinity with someone whose person he loves and whose companionship he prizes? I do not, indeed, enter into 'egoistic association' with others unless this association will in some way profit me, directly or indirectly, but to say this is not to rule out the possibility that the act of association will in itself constitute for me an independent source of lively gratification and delight. 'Perhaps at this moment underneath his window children are running to join a group of playmates; if he looks at them he will see gay egoistic associations. Perhaps Hess has a friend, a sweetheart; in which case he may know how one heart discovers itself in another heart, and how the two make an egoistic association that they may find enjoyment in each other, without either thereby "getting short measure". Perhaps he meets a few friends on the street and is invited to accompany them to a tavern; does he go in order to fulfil a duty of friendship, or does he "associate" with them because he promises himself enjoyment from it? Should they be grateful to him for his sactifice, or do they know that for a short time they have formed an "egoistic association"?'[1]

The other critic to whom Stirner vouchsafed a public, if much shorter reply was Kuno Fischer, who in an article originally printed in the short-lived *Leipziger Revue* of 1847 had described Stirner as the archetypal representative of 'The Modern Sophists'. Contrasting the 'dogmatists', or those thinkers who subordinated themselves to the rule of thought, with the 'sophists' or those who exalted themselves and their interests above thought, Fischer declared Stirner to be the most dogmatic of sophists, who not only erected the self-centred individual into an absolute principle but even made the individual subject's proprietorial domination of his thoughts into a kind of categorical imperative. In his reply, 'The Philosophical Reactionaries', which appeared in the 1847 volume of Wigand's *Epigonen*, Stirner attempted to refute Fischer's indictment on both counts. In the first place, he maintained, Fischer could have learned from a cursory glance at Stirner's published rejoinder to his earlier reviewers that 'egoism',

[1] Op. cit., pp. 395–6.

far from being a dogmatic category, was never intended to be more than 'a "phrase", albeit the last possible "phrase", which is fitted to put an end to the whole regiment of phrases'.[1] And in the second place, Stirner insists, the distinction between the thinking subject and the thoughts which he deploys is certainly a possible, and therefore a valid, one. 'A "thought" is something finished, something which has been thought and from which I constantly distinguish myself, as does the creator from the creature, the father from the son. Both from the thoughts which I have thought, and from those which I shall think, I distinguish myself just as certainly; the ones are now objects to me, the others—eggs as yet unlaid. And thus I remain "the particular, contingent subject".'[2] The instantaneous subject who allows no principle to crystallize at any point in his perpetual self-projection and self-dissolution is hardly open to the charge of dogmatism. Fearing no concept, and having himself superseded the reign of mere 'phrases', he is equally impervious to the charge of sophistry.

Numerous other reviews and criticisms of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* appeared in sundry journals during the period immediately following its publication. Kuno Fischer, who had received advance notice of Stirner's reply to his earlier criticisms, was able to insert a further critical article in the 1847 volume of the *Epigonen* which carried Stirner's reply to his earlier criticisms, and the same volume included a long essay on *Der Einzige* from the pen of Frau von Arnim. In a variety of periodicals representing all shades of topical opinion, lesser figures rushed, half-fearfully, half-derisively to appraise the work and to discuss its significance for contemporary German philosophy, often embracing with delight its author's destructive critique of the established forms of liberal humanism and ethical socialism, but always recoiling in horror from his implacable rejection of ethical and humane principles of every other kind. The socialist reply to Stirner, begun by Hess, was renewed, systematized, and completed by Marx and Engels, who, regarding *Der Einzige* as the *reductio ad absurdum* of existing German philosophy, devoted the winter of 1845–6 to composing their vast obituary on 'the German ideology' and

[1] Op. cit., p. 410. [2] Op. cit., pp. 403–4.

annotating Stirner's place in it. None of this, however, disturbed Stirner in the metaphysical anchorage in which he had now finally settled. He was quite unaware of Marx's massive criticisms, which remained unpublished and in fact did not see the light of day until the next century. And as far as he was concerned, the debate with Fischer and with all his other protagonists was to all intents and purposes closed. The Unique One had entered into his property, which he now wanted only to enjoy in peace.

Stirner had enjoyed a fleeting and alarming fame. His 'conscious egoism' had been parodied in a popular novel,[1] and he himself had even appeared, thinly disguised, as a philosophical character in another novel.[2] In his withdrawn assurance, however, it is doubtful whether he would ever again have troubled to intervene publicly in the moral and social controversies of the times, even if events had kept his ideas at the forefront of public attention. As it happened, his star subsided as dramatically as it had risen. For a time he had appeared like a huge comet in the sky, temporarily eclipsing all others, until he began to drop, with increasing rapidity, from his zenith and disappeared at last over the horizon, immediately to be forgotten by those onlookers who had watched his appalling course. After 1848 a great silence descended on the ideas of the man who for so short a time had aroused such disquiet in so many minds, a silence which was not to be broken for nearly fifty years. In the end two generations were to elapse. Bauer, Ruge, Hess, and the great majority of Stirner's critics were themselves to be forgotten and overlaid by the dust of later upheavals, before new men rediscovered Stirner's pertinence to the issues of new times. Having made his definitive act of self-assertion in *Der Einzige*, 'the laborious work of the best years of his life',[3] and defended it against the first comers, Stirner had found no cause to do more, but had been content to transmit his philosophical statement to posterity as it stood. If the immediate result was an almost complete oblivion, the final outcome was to preserve his philosophy, in glacial purity, for an age fraught with graver issues and receptive to the most desperate solutions.

[1] *Love-Letters without Love*, by K. Bürger

[2] *Modern Titans*, by R. Giseke.

[3] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 413.

PART II

Adversaries and Successors

CHAPTER V

STIRNER AND THE ORIGINS OF MARXISM

It is always a difficult matter to evaluate the intellectual legacy left by a philosopher, and it is usually even more difficult to identify those of his successors among whom it eventually came to be apportioned. Since most philosophers die intestate, there is often no possibility of discovering their rightful heirs or indeed of determining, with any degree of accuracy, the nature and extent of their unsettled estate. Some philosophers are evidently quite bankrupt at death. Others, like Stirner, apparently leave nothing but worthless stock, which passes into circulation unnoticed when their estate is broken up, making it virtually impossible to identify their ultimate and unintended beneficiaries. When, as in the case of Stirner, half a century elapses before men realize that the once worthless stock has now appreciated considerably in value, the historian's task becomes almost hopeless. The most he can do is to speculate aloud on any resemblances he may observe between specific items known to have once belonged to the original estate and certain extant pieces of property now respectably established in other hands.

Any historian writing in, say, 1894 would have been perfectly justified in concluding that, after two generations of oblivion, the ideas of Max Stirner had been and would remain utterly without historic influence or interest, other than of an antiquarian kind. A few short years afterwards, however, this verdict would have had to be considerably modified, as the rapidly spreading celebrity of Nietzsche's philosophy ignited a fresh and sympathetic interest in Stirner's ethic of self-will; while today, more than one hundred and twenty years after the first appearance of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, the verdict would have to be completely reversed, although the actual scope, character, and direction of Stirner's belated impact are almost impossible to establish in any detail and

with any certainty or precision. Although he today receives formal recognition by anarchist writers as the classic exponent of 'anarchist individualism', he has no philosophical disciples among anarchists and tends to be respected or admired from a distance rather than imitated or followed as a guide; and although his nihilistic phenomenology often anticipates, with uncanny pertinence, many of the central themes which figure in contemporary existentialist writings, both atheistic and religious, few prominent existentialist thinkers seem to be directly acquainted with, fewer still to have been positively animated by, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*. However, a patriarch need not be a legislator, and a prophet is not necessarily a mandarin. For good or ill, Stirner's nihilistic egoism represents one of the deviant tributaries which have now entered the mainstream of European philosophy and insensibly but decisively affected its ultimate course. If there have been others whose flow has been more diffuse and momentous, there is none whose tortuous, subterranean passage it is more instructive to explore.

Paradoxically, the one point at which Stirner's philosophy is absolutely known to have entered the mainstream of European thought brought it swirling into one of the central and most powerful channels of all; but, by a double irony, its crucial influence on two historic personages who were subsequently to achieve unparalleled world fame occurred at a stage of their development which has since been unaccountably shrouded in apathetic obsurity. The historic figures were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and the stage of development at which they were forced to come to terms with Stirner was the fateful period which gave birth to the doctrine of historical materialism. Although Marx had not known Stirner in Berlin, which he quitted some months before Stirner began to frequent 'die Freien', or as a correspondent of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which he began to edit just after Stirner had ceased his contributions to the newspaper, he had certainly heard of him from Engels, who had spent many an evening beside Stirner in the company at Hippel's.[1] In a long letter

[1] Fifty years afterwards Engels recollected Stirner vividly enough to be able to portray him in a sketch which Mackay reproduced in his biography.

to Marx, only a few days after the publication of *Der Einzige*, Engels wrote: 'You will probably have heard talk of, if you have not yet read, Stirner's book. . . . it is the egoism of Bentham, developed on the one hand with greater logic, on the other with less logic. . .this work is important, far more important than Hess believes, for instance . . . the first point we find true is that, before doing whatever we will on behalf of some idea, we have first to make our cause personal, egoistic . . . it is equally from egoism that we are communists . . . . Stirner is right to reject the "Man" of Feuerbach . . . [since] Feuerbach's Man is derived from God.' Engels added that, while 'among all "die Freien", Stirner obviously has the most talent, personality, and dynamism', his book 'once more shows the degree to which everything emanating from Berlin is infected by abstraction'[1]. Engels' modified rapture must have been chilled by Marx's reply, for in his next letter we find him dismissing *Der Einzige* thus: 'As for Stirner, I entirely share your opinion. When I wrote to you, I was still too much under the immediate impression produced by the book; but, since I have closed it and have been able to reflect at greater length, I find in it what you find.'[2] Marx's judgment of *Der Einzige*, which so happily coincided with that of Engels, was shortly to be stated, with monumental thoroughness, in *The German Ideology*.

It was in September 1845, soon after their return from England, where they had seen at first hand the stark social and economic realities of modern industrial conditions, that Marx and Engels decided to render their final account of what now struck them as the barren metaphysical logomachies of German philosophy. The speculations of Feuerbach, Bauer, Stirner, and German 'philosophical socialism' now appeared to them as absurd rodomontade, scandalously insensible to the social agonies by which they were surrounded. They would therefore compose a final delineation and assessment of contemporary German philosophy, which would in effect pronounce capital sentence upon it. Their labours produced the manuscript known as *The German Ideology*, largely completed by May 1846, but publication of which was suspended when the guarantors withdrew, so that the work, as Marx later

[1] Letter to Marx, 19 November, 1844. [2] Letter to Marx, 20 January, 1845.

wrote, was finally 'abandoned to the gnawing criticism of the mice, all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose—to clear our own minds'[1]. It is nothing short of remarkable that this immense work, which in fact represents Marx's definitive judgment on the philosophical culture which had incubated him, was to remain virtually unknown for nearly a hundred years, largely owing to the presumption that it was unintelligible without a prior, tedious examination of the ideas of a negligible philosopher, Max Stirner. Extracts from *The German Ideology* were first published by Bernstein in 1903–4. The book was not, however, published in full until it appeared in the Moscow edition of the complete works of Marx and Engels, in 1932. When an English translation was issued six years later, the editor decided that the central part of the work, devoted to systematic criticism of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, could safely be omitted.[2]

There are a number of causes, besides the vicissitudes of publication, which partially explain, if they do not justify, the historic neglect of *The German Ideology* as a whole and the systematic depreciation of that major part of it devoted to the criticism of Stirner. Much of the blame must be borne by Engels, who after Marx's death became the presiding guardian and director of historical materialism and who was naturally and generally accepted as the unquestionable authority on its historical genesis. When he came to write his famous essay on 'Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy' in 1886, Engels gave an account of the origins of historical materialism which received wide popular currency, but which unfortunately enshrined a number of straightforward historical errors in addition to several gross anachronisms and equally serious mistakes of emphasis. Thus, in this influential essay, Engels at one point identifies the *Theses on Feuerbach* (written in the spring of 1845) and at another *The Holy Family* (written in the autumn of 1844)

[1] Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

[2] *The German Ideology*, Parts I and III, ed. by R. Pascal, London, 1938. There has now appeared a complete English translation of *The German Ideology*, edited by S. Ryazanskaya, London, 1965.

as the earliest Marxist writing to contain the germ of the new doctrine; he attributes to certain scientific advances, such as the discovery of the transformation of energy and the Darwinian theory of evolution, a vital role in the evolution of dialectical materialism which they did not play and, on chronological grounds alone, could not possibly have played; he explicitly minimizes the significance of *The German Ideology* as a stage in the development of the materialist conception of history; he succeeds in generally obscuring the circumstances in which Marx came to reject the abstract humanism of Feuerbach, so incidentally suppressing the part played by *Der Einzige* in this process; and he utterly fails to recall the catalytic contribution of Stirner to the as yet unresolved debate of 1845, referring to him confusedly as 'the prophet of contemporary anarchism' and aligning him with Bakunin and even with Proudhon, whom Stirner despised. From all these causes, it is perhaps not after all so surprising that students of Marxism tend to throw only one brief and dismayed glance at the long and involved section of *The German Ideology* devoted to an analysis of *Der Einzige*, particularly since, as Sidney Hook says, 'for the most part Marx's criticisms are unintelligible unless read together with Stirner's text',[1] and perhaps also since, for the specific purposes of Marxist exegesis, the most characteristic and memorable aphorisms are nearly all to be found in the relatively short and lucid chapter on Feuerbach with which the work opens.

The German Ideology is divided into two Parts. The Second Part, which is devoted entirely to a critical analysis of 'True Socialism', mainly in the person of Karl Grün, is markedly much shorter than Part One, to which it is really little more than an appendix. Part One opens with the chapter entitled 'Feuerbach: opposition between the materialist and the idealist outlook', which, page for page, is undoubtedly the most pregnantly 'Marxist' chapter of the book. The Feuerbach whose internal contradictions are mercilessly exposed, however, is the Feuerbach who had so recently revised his abstract humanism in an attempt to parry the allegations of transcendence which Stirner had levelled against his ideal of 'Man'. It is his sensualistic materialism, rather

[1] S. Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, ch. 5, sec. II, introduction.

than his humanism, which Marx and Engels are here immediately concerned to refute, and it is unmistakably evident, as Arvon declares, that the stages of their refutation 'are in fact the perspectives which had been progressively opened to Marx and Engels in the course of their study of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*'.[1] Indeed, it is scarcely too much to say that the general plan of this whole First Part (which represents more than four-fifths of the entire book), and the dialectical movement of ideas within it, are in principle and in detail determined by its authors' consciousness of *Der Einzige* as an already standing judgment on 'the German ideology'—a judgment which on some counts they had no desire to reverse, but one which as a whole they required to invalidate if they were to establish their own judgment as the final and uniquely authoritative one.

The remainder of Part One consists of the chapters on Bruno Bauer and on Stirner, who as 'Saint Bruno' and 'Saint Max' are grouped together as the spiritual Fathers of 'The Council of Leipzig'.[2] The chapter on 'Saint Bruno' is very short, almost certainly because Marx and Engels felt that they had already dealt the *coup de grâce* to Bauer's philosophy of 'sovereign criticism' in *The Holy Family*. If they now aimed this posthumous blow at the blessed martyr, it was because one of his relics, namely a recent article of his in *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift*[3], had been insinuated into the polemic between Feuerbach and Stirner, and they were determined to foreclose any possibility of a resurrection for this particular Father. 'Saint Bruno' is in fact little more than the preamble to the vast chapter entitled 'Saint Max', which from its length alone—almost two-thirds of the whole book—can be seen to constitute the heart of *The German Ideology*. Throughout the hundreds of pages of 'Saint Max', Marx pursues Stirner with a savagery and rancour which, master of invective as he was, he rarely ever equalled. Every resource of sarcasm, every possibility of

[1] Arvon, *Aux sources de l'existentialisme*, p. 149.

[2] So called because both Bauer and Stirner were contributors to *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift*, published in Leipzig.

[3] 'A Characterization of Feuerbach', which appeared in volume 3 of 1845, the same issue in which appeared Stirner's general reply to his critics.

ridicule, is enlisted to stage this protracted parody of a world-outlook which Marx plainly considered to be literally a tissue of unpleasant fantasies, inherently grotesque but also potentially dangerous. Stirner's dreams of metaphysical conquest are brutally and tirelessly burlesqued. When Marx wearies of portraying him as 'the blessed Max', whose 'sacred book fell down from heaven towards the end of 1844',[1] he casts him in the part of a modern Don Quixote, whose heroic fight against all the moral, social, and religious powers which seek to enslave him is in sad reality no more than a tilting against windmills; when this role is eventually allotted to someone else, Stirner is decked in the guise of Sancho Panza, and as 'Saint Sancho' his every footstep is dogged by the relentless Marx, whose heavy mockery fails to conceal his real and continuous anxiety lest his prey should finally prove invulnerable to his envenomed barbs. As Marx's onslaught becomes more ferocious, the humour becomes more and more thin, what started out as a pleasing stylistic whimsy becomes a clumsy and pedantic artifice, and at the end the reader experiences a sense of incredulous relief that the monomaniac prolixity is at last over. At the end, however, one realizes that Marx and Engles have involuntarily paid Stirner an astonishing tribute. With painstaking thoroughness they have dissected and annotated the whole of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, both 'The Old Testament' (i.e. the First Part on 'Man') and 'The New Testament' (Stirner's Second Part, entitled 'I'), chapter by chapter and section by section, from 'Genesis' (or 'A Human Life') to 'The Song of Solomon' (or 'The Unique One', with which the work ends). There is not an argument, not a concept, barely even a phrase, which has escaped their fascinated analysis. Stirner could scarcely have expected more flattering attention from more eminent critics.

In the historical context of 1845, Marx and Engels had good reasons for wishing to expose and destroy Stirner's particular form of nihilistic egoism. At that moment of time, in the autumn of 1845, Stirner undoubtedly represented their most dangerous opponent and the most effective philosophical critic of socialism

[1] *The German Ideology* of Marx and Engels: 'Saint Max', introduction. (Ryazanskaya ed., p. 123.)

within Germany. Their former ally, Arnold Ruge,[1] had been so impressed by *Der Einzige* that he was prepared to recognize Stirner as 'the theoretical liberator' of Germany, who had won victory on behalf of the concrete living individual over the abstract generalities which had hitherto enslaved him.[2] Under Stirner's influence, Ruge was prepared to discard 'Society' and 'Equality' along with 'Humanity' and all the other sterile abstractions that required to be incinerated if genuine social advance were to become possible. Now, Marx was particularly sensitive to allegations that his version of socialism was tainted by the kinds of abstract moral ideal which Stirner had shown to be essentially 'transcendent'. This was the allegation that Ruge was circulating, and it was given fresh currency by an article in the second volume of *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift* of 1845, written by Gustav Julius, a prominent associate of the Bauers. Clearly inspired by Stirner's critique of socialism, Julius went out of his way to stress the essentially Feuerbachian character of Marx's 'practical humanism' and concluded that, like Feuerbach, Marx was helplessly enmeshed in what was still fundamentally a form of religious alienation, since, like Feuerbach, he was fundamentally a dualist in spite of himself. The modern socialist, Julius maliciously asserted, regarded egoism with exactly the same religious horror with which atheism was regarded by Christians. The same theme was taken up by Bruno Bauer himself, in his article, 'A Characterization of Feuerbach', in the third volume of *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift* of that year. In this article (the one that finally stung Marx and Engels to undertake their review of contemporary German 'ideology') Bauer took for granted that the modern German socialists, Marx and Engels as well as Hess, were first and foremost disciples of Feuerbach, and that *The Holy Family* in reality represented the last desperate and abortive attempt of Feuerbachian humanism to defend itself against the liberating criticism of pure self-consciousness. Angered by these allegations; determined to show that modern socialism neither generated a

[1] Ruge appears in *The German Ideology* as 'Dottore Graziano'.

[2] Ruge expressed his admiration for Stirner's achievement in letters to Nauwerck and Hess, and later in his work entitled *Our Last Ten Years*.

new form of alienation to such speculative abstractions as the fictitious generic 'Man', nor depended on quasi-religious and equally fictitious ideals of 'Morality' or 'Justice'; and resentfully aware that it was from Stirner, whose critique of Feuerbach and Proudhon had sown the widespread conviction that socialist morality was as full of superstitions as the Apostles' Creed, that these allegations in the last analysis emanated; Marx and Engels resolved to turn the tables on their critics and to exhibit, with unanswerable if exasperating detail, the source and nature of their enemies' own incurable illusions, and above all the illusions of Stirner, by writing 'Saint Max' and *The German Ideology*.

Marx's basic and recurring criticism of Stirner is that his conception of 'consciousness' is uselessly metaphysical, and that the figure of The Unique One therefore remains a bizarre and empty abstraction. Marx and Engels agreed with Feuerbach in at least this, that human nature and human consciousness are originally and inherently *social*, and they added that the individual consciousness cannot be understood in abstraction from the social complex which produces it. 'This "I" of Stirner', Marx says, 'is no "individual of flesh and blood", but an artificial category. . . .'[1] When Stirner speaks of The Unique One as the 'concrete, sensuous I', he tends to lapse into materialistic categories of the grossest kind; when he speaks of him instead as the 'creative nothingness', he invariably lapses into the degenerate categories of disembodied idealism. Moreover, self-consciousness, both as the consciousness which distinguishes itself from the material environment and as that which distinguishes itself from the consciousness of others, is genetically posterior to the individual's material relationship to his environment and his dialectical encounter with others, which are its foundation. 'It does not depend on *consciousness*, but on *being*; not on thought, but on life; it depends on the empirical development and life-form of the individual, which in turn depends on the circumstances of the world.'[2] Marx's criticism receives its most famous expression in

[1] Marx and Engels, op. cit., 'Saint Max', I, 'Old Testament', sec. 5. (Ryazanskaya, p. 209.)

[2] Op. cit., 'Saint Max', I, 'New Testament', sec. 2. (Ryazanskaya, p. 290.)

the opening chapter on 'Feuerbach': 'Morality, religion, metaphysics, and other ideologies, and their corresponding forms of consciousness, no longer retain, therefore, their semblance of autonomous existence. They have no history, no development; it is men who, in developing their material production and their material intercourse, change, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but on the contrary life that determines consciousness.'[1]

One of the devious results of that fundamental and perennial feature of human life, the division of labour, is that the intellectual activity of men continually seeks to sever itself from their other material activities, to purge itself of its origins and to become 'pure philosophy', 'pure theology', 'pure knowledge'. The material relations of men are the infrastructure on which religion, art, philosophy, science—the whole superstructure of consciousness in all its forms—are based, but in a society rent by class divisions these divisions are reflected in consciousness also, which seeks to constitute itself into a world of its own. Modern German philosophy furnishes the classic example of a consciousness obsessed by its illusion of autonomy. The conceptual absolutism of Hegel, for whom the world of ideas developed according to its own inner logical metabolism, properly culminates in the sovereign self-consciousness of Bauer, for whom intellectual integrity can be preserved only by chastely recoiling from the harsh world of social reality; and the whole movement finds its *reductio ad absurdum* in the solipsism of Stirner, for whom external reality exists only as an array of verbal fetishes awaiting verbal destruction by the Unique One's verbal omnipotence. Stirner's solitary incantations, as he moves endlessly round a magic circle of his own making, are in terms of the real world, the world of social fact, utterly meaningless. If it is the business of the thinker to describe and explain historical reality, Stirner's system describes nothing and explains nothing.

For Marx and Engels, then, Stirner provides the perfect example of the pure ideologist encased in a world of self-support-

[1] Op. cit., 'Feuerbach', sec. A. (Ryazanskaya, p. 38.)

ing categories wholly unrelated to historical reality. Is it surprising that when he attempts to criticize communism, he succeeds only in verbally negating the abstract concept of 'Communism', that he succeeds only in dissolving what in any case was never more than his own mental figment? 'With Stirner "Communism" begins with a search for its "essence". . . . That communism is a highly practical movement, which pursues practical ends by practical means, . . . this naturally does not interest our Saint. Stirner's "Communism", which yearns so much for its "essence", thus boils down to a mere philosophical category. . . .'[1] Is it surprising that Stirner fails to overcome his own 'alienation' as a real, living individual, that his central project—his 'reappropriation' of himself—remains purely symbolic, that it never amounts to more than a futile charade? What other result could be expected from so vacuous a project? The actual alienation from which individuals suffer is no mere conceptual rupture or schism in consciousness but a harsh social reality, and the historic expropriation which requires to be overcome is no merely symbolic deprivation but a brute fact of economic life. How could The Unique One hope to change the world, when he is totally unable to understand it?

For Marx and Engels, Stirner's failure is essentially a failure of *method*. Stirner may have discarded the ideals of Feuerbach, Proudhon, and Bauer, but he retains their abstract, *a priori* method of philosophizing, a method which is completely unhistorical and which studiously ignores the actual empirical patterns to be discerned in social affairs. In Stirner's case, this disregard of socio-historical data is taken to such extremes that it ends in absolute subjectivism. Stirner is the perfect autistic thinker. When he has said, 'I reject the State!', he then coolly considers the State no longer to exist. ' "His own" he remains "at all times and under all circumstances", so long as he *understands* himself to be his own. This is a very hypothetical kind of self-possession, which depends on his understanding—by which he understands a slavish casuistry',[2] retorts Marx: the State, like any other human institution, can only be destroyed by men who are prepared to engage in the

[1] Op. cit., 'Saint Max', I, 'Old Testament', sec. 6 (B). (Ryazanskaya, p. 235.)
[2] Op. cit., 'Saint Max', I, 'New Testament', sec. 4. (Ryazanskaya, p. 340.)

concrete, practical task of subverting the social and economic foundations on which State power rests. Far from being the fire-eating rebel who defiantly casts down the State and its laws, Stirner takes care never to leave the calm safety of his study, even in theory. His acts of rebellion are purely nominal. As far as the real world is concerned, they accomplish nothing because they were never intended to accomplish anything. If human affairs are no more than states of The Unique One's consciousness, which he can alter at will, he will scarcely be likely to leave the charmed sanctity of his private consciousness to intervene practically in the economic and political struggle. As far as changing the real world is concerned, The Unique One is satisfied to remain objectively impotent. He is the apotheosis of social inertia.

The truth is, Marx concludes, that Stirner, the arch-enemy of religion and everything religious, is himself from start to finish the typically religious thinker. *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* is a modern tragi-comedy. Its author is 'religious' in his own sense of the term, for the only reality of which he takes cognizance is spiritual reality, the world which he dissolves is always the world of concepts, of ideals, and the only activity of which he is capable is the purely nominal activity of subjectively destroying the phantasmal images which arise in his own introverted consciousness. He cannot begin to cope with reality until he has first securely converted it into the ideal abstractions with which alone he feels at home. On one passage from *Der Einzige*, Marx makes the following comment: 'By means of a few quotation marks Sancho transmutes "everyone" into a Person, "Society" as a Person, as a Subject, i.e. as sacred, as "the Sacred". Now our Saint knows where he is, now he can unloose the whole flood of his zeal against "the Sacred", in the course of which communism is naturally destroyed.'[1] Unable to interpret the concrete historical changes experienced by concrete living men, Stirner naively equates human history with the history of ideas. Thus by 'Christianity' he understands a self-determining movement of 'the Christian Spirit', and remains blissfully unaware that Christianity

[1] Op. cit., 'Saint Max', I, 'Old Testament', sec. 6 (B). (Ryazanskaya, p. 224.)

is a form of religious consciousness produced by a certain type of society, which is in turn produced by certain determinate industrial and commercial relations. A thinker for whom thought-forms alone exist, and who cannot grasp that they are the inevitable reflection of objective and evolving material conditions, will never even be able to understand the evolution and operation of those thought-forms in which he lives and moves and has his being. Stirner may be a model Saint, but he is utterly unqualified to practise as a dialectician.

Stirner's dialectical ineptitude is finally exposed by the confusions in his own version of the egoistic ethic. There is a trivial sense in which all men are 'egoists', inasmuch as every deliberate action is undertaken to produce some result which the agent desires, and in this sense the object of even the most charitable actions could be said to be the 'satisfaction' of the agent's desires. The Unique One is clearly not an egoist in this trivial sense, and he frequently expresses his contempt for the generality of men, who are 'unconscious egoists' of this kind. In the Unique One Stirner describes a figure who, having coolly determined his own immediate and arbitrary interests, ruthlessly and consciously pursues them with total and deliberate disregard of the interests of others. Exactly who and what *is* this figure of 'the conscious egoist', however? Marx is in no doubt. It is certainly neither the actual Max Stirner nor any other actual man, but it is certainly the *theoretical* Stirner and it may be his theoretical *ideal* for at least some other men. The figure of The Unique One is just as much a *norm*, just as much an ideal, just as much a fetish, as the most celestial fantasies of the most credulous moralists and theologians. The idea of a unique and self-contained individual, whose private interests are wholly singular and exclusive, is and can only be an *idea*, for human reality as it actually exists is universally and inextricably *social*. This is the fact which communism recognizes and proclaims. 'The communists preach no *ethic*, as Stirner so extensively does.'[1] They construct no ideals, either of altruism or of egoism. They perceive that as a matter of *fact*, under modern

[1] Op. cit., 'Saint Max', I, 'New Testament', sec. 2. (Ryazanskaya, p. 272).

social conditions, men frequently behave selfishly and frequently behave altruistically, but they also perceive that the frequent conflict between men's selfish interests and the general interest is, again as a matter of fact, attributable to these very social conditions under which they are compelled to lead their lives. Far from there being a necessary conflict between private interests and the public interest, these are inherently complementary. Stirner's conscious egoism is 'a solemn parody of the Benthamite book-keeping of one's own interests and possessions', as if a man's interests were arbitrarily chosen by an act of his personal will instead of 'by the division of labour and the objective conditions of his class'.[1] There is no sharp distinction between a man's interests and the social interest; on the contrary, an individual's interests are ultimately indissociable from those of society and, at the present stage of history, from those of his class. Likewise, there is no ultimate distinction between a man's own products and the products of society; since every product of a man's labour is ultimately the collective product of interacting human labour, the fruits of individual labour belong collectively to society, by means of which alone their production is possible. 'My Own', which The Unique One cherishes so voluptuously, is Stirner's most characteristic and most fraudulent myth.

Stirner's perpetual obsession with his 'property', Marx asserts, stamps him (despite his Bohemian coloration) as the ideological representative of the German petty-bourgeoisie. The imperious Unique One is, all unconsciously, a philosophical symbol of the resentments and frustrations of small farmers and shopkeepers, deprived of adequate economic expression in Germany, jealous of the powerful capitalists to whose wealth they aspire and fearful of the despised workingmen by whose growing militancy they are threatened. Stirner clutches his 'property' as a peasant clutches his smallholding. In a former age, the great ideologists of the rising bourgeois class, men like Bentham, Helvétius, and Holbach, had expounded a philosophy of naked self-interest, according to which 'all the manifold relations of human beings dissolve into the one

[1] Loc. cit. (Ryazanskaya, pp. 286–7.)

relation of utility'.[1] This theory of mutual exploitation is weakly caricatured in Stirner, for whom indeed 'our only relation to one another is that of *usableness*, utility, use',[2] but for whom the 'utility' in question now signifies no more than a purely symbolic preservation and purely notional aggrandizement of his 'property' in a purely metaphysical sense. A living myth has been replaced by a dead letter. 'Even if Stirner had done in his Book what Helvétius and Holbach did in the preceding century, the anachronism would have been just as absurd. But we saw how he replaced the active bourgeois egoism by a bombastic egoism-in-itself. His sole reward he receives against his will and without knowing it: the reward of being the expression of the contemporary German petty-bourgeois striving to become bourgeois. It was obviously appropriate that, paltry, timorous, and embarrassed as these petty-bourgeois in practice exhibit themselves, with proportionate loudness, bravado, and audacity did The Unique One swagger out with their other philosophical representatives into the world.'[3] Stirner's intellectual poverty reflects the economic and social insecurity of the German petty-bourgeoisie. Saint Max, in short, is the sterile and inglorious representative of a mean and futile class.

Undoubtedly, as Hook states, 'Marx gauged the positive merit of Stirner's work as well as the negative.'[4] Committed as he was, however, to fight for the transformation of the material conditions of the working class, and convinced as he was that this transformation could only be accomplished by a complete social and economic revolution, it was inevitable that Marx should be enraged by what he regarded as the fictitious verbal programme of a rival thinker, and that he should therefore resolve to destroy him once and for all. In advocating his individualistic 'insurrection' Stirner was in effect counteracting the social revolution in favour of a purely metaphysical revolt, a non-revolution. The Unique One, who 'straightens himself up' above existing society, leaving

[1] Op. cit., 'Saint Max', I, 'New Testament', sec. 5, sub-sec. entitled 'Morality, Intercourse, Theory of Exploitation'. (Ryazanskaya, p. 460.)

[2] D.E., p. 347.

[3] Marx and Engels, loc. cit. (Ryazanskaya, p. 462.)

[4] Hook, op. cit., ch. 5, sec. II, introduction.

society as it is, may be in name a revolutionary but is in effect a reactionary. In the words of Maximilien Rubel: 'It is because Marx and Engels basically sought the same end as Stirner, that is a society of free men who are each therefore "unique", that they thought it necessary to subject *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* to so exhaustive and severe a critique: they had to demonstrate that this end could not be achieved without a real political and revolutionary struggle, led by those who least resembled the type outlined by Stirner.'[1]

If Stirner had provoked Marx to pour out the vials of his wrath, he had also, however, provoked him into a more realistic and creative response. *Der Einzige* undoubtedly helped to shock Marx into reappraising the moral and humanistic assumptions of his socialist programme, and it was in the course of this reappraisal that he and Engels came to formulate the fundamental propositions of the doctrine that developed into 'the materialist conception of history'. The first tentative steps towards Marx's historic break with 'humanitarian' socialism were taken in Brussels in the spring of 1845, when he was still fresh from his reading of Stirner's book, and survived as the jottings to be published after his death as the *Theses on Feuerbach*. A studied and full-scale reappraisal of the moral and metaphysical foundations of his socialism, however, had to wait until the autumn of that year, when he at last had the leisure to take up Stirner's challenge in *The German Ideology*.

There is good reason to believe, then, that at least some of the distinctive and classical 'Marxist' doctrines which received their first considered formulation in *The German Ideology* were arrived at as a direct result of Marx's study of *Der Einzige*. Writing of Marx and Engels as they were in the period immediately before they resolved to compose their joint reply to Stirner, Rubel affirms: 'As with Marx, one finds in what Engels wrote at that time a strong tendency to give socialism an ethical motivation'.[2] In the meantime, however, Stirner had demonstrated the 'religious' origin and fetishistic character of all ethical ideals, and notably

[1] M. Rubel, *Karl Marx: essai de biographie intellectuelle*, Paris, 1957, p. 226.
[2] Rubel, op. cit., p. 173.

those of the socialists, and this criticism it was impossible for them to ignore. Now, from 1845 onwards we find that Marx and Engels vehemently distinguish their own 'scientific' socialism, by which they understand their value-free account of a real transformation of social conditions to be historically brought about by objective economic change, from all the ethical or 'utopian' versions of socialism which lack an assured basis in socio-economic fact. The transition is dramatically illustrated by their treatment of Proudhon, whose socialist morality they had defended at length in *The Holy Family* against the criticism of Bauer and his disciples; on whom, a year later, in *The German Ideology*, they dryly commented that 'it would be easy to furnish a critique of the Proudhonian dialectic';[1] and against whom, only a year afterwards, Marx was to address his whole polemical armoury in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in which he was to write scathingly of his erstwhile ally: 'For M. Proudhon every economic category has two sides—one good, the other bad . . . the only problem to be solved is—how to keep the good side, while eliminating the bad . . . For him the dialectical movement is just the dogmatic distinction between good and bad.'[2] Thus, from a passionately moral commitment to communism as a humanitarian creed, in a relatively short span of time Marx transferred to a sociological affirmation of communism as the historical outcome of objective economic forces. This crisis in Marx's orientation reached its height in 1845; it had been chronically aggravated, if not precipitated, by Stirner's critique of socialist morality, which made it increasingly urgent to reach a solution; and of course it was in *The German Ideology* that the fundamental outlines of the final solution were for the first time propounded.

The German Ideology also denotes Marx's final abandonment of those speculative abstractions, such as the Feuerbachian ideal of 'Man', which had hitherto served as the metaphysical foundations of his socialism. From 1845 Marxist socialism is characterized by its emphasis on concrete historical data and its contempt for the

[1] Marx and Engels, op. cit., 'Karl Grün', sec. on 'Proudhon'. (Ryazanskaya, p. 598.)

[2] Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, ch. 2, sec. 1, Fourth Observation.

barren 'theological' premises of the Young Hegelians. According to Rubel: 'Having arrived at the sociological stage of his thought, Marx could no longer rest in the Feuerbachian anthropology to which Engels had rendered such resounding homage in *The Holy Family*'.[1] The Marx who, in his economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844, had enthusiastically declared that 'the great achievement of Feuerbach is . . . to have founded genuine materialism and positive science by making the social relationship of "man to man" the basic principle of his theory';[2] this was the Marx who, in the following year in *The German Ideology*, accuses his former mentor of 'saying "Man" instead of "actual historical men" ' and of thereby encouraging misguided 'essentialist' attacks on 'communism as "the spirit of Spirit", as a philosophical category'.[3] From 1845 Marx's aim is to establish a scientific socialism rigorously governed by and responsive to the factual results of his sociological researches, and to this end he gladly and violently shook the arid dust of contemporary German metaphysics from his feet. Thus, the Marx who emerges from *The German Ideology* is the Marx who is at least in process of freeing himself from the *a priori* categories in terms of which his socialist beliefs had hitherto been formulated, but which he now abruptly dismisses as the rhetorical abstractions of an introverted and reactionary scholasticism.

Now, while it would be rash to claim that Marx's transition from moral commitment to empirical inquiry, and from metaphysical speculation to historical analysis, was entirely attributable to the astringent influence of Stirner's book, it would be impossible to deny that his reading of *Der Einzige* was a major, and perhaps a culminating, factor in what was admittedly a gradual process. Hook roundly asserts that 'in revealing the hollowness of slogans which appealed to humanity, country, or abstract freedom, Stirner prepared the way for a realistic analysis of the issues these phrases were used to conceal'.[4] Certainly, Marx's respect for

[1] Rubel, op. cit., p. 159.
[2] *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, sec. I, vol. 3, pp. 151–2.
[4] Marx and Engels, op. cit., 'Feuerbach', sec. A. (2). (Ryazanskaya, pp. 55–7.)
[5] Hook, op. cit., ch. 5, sec. II, 1 (a).

Feuerbach had been badly shaken by the devastating critique to which the latter had been subjected in *Der Einzige*. And certainly, Stirner's mordant exposure of Proudhon ensured that Marx would never again attempt to base his communist programme on the philanthropic sentiments of a vague and capricious morality. If Marx was already growing disillusioned with the stagnant categories of German philosophy in general, and with the pedantic shibboleths of liberal humanism in particular, his doubts must have been sickeningly confirmed by Stirner's jubilant and wholesale denunciation of such moral and metaphysical standpoints as the age had to offer. While, therefore, the exact nature and degree of Stirner's influence must remain problematic, the open-minded historian may well be disposed to concede, with Arvon, that 'above all in provoking Karl Marx to shed his humanistic illusions, he exercised a far from negligible influence on the evolution of socialist thought'.[1]

Besides impelling Marx to undertake a drastic review of his moral and metaphysical presuppositions, Stirner's work may have played a less direct, but equally significant, part in the evolution of the crucial Marxist concept of 'Praxis' or 'creative activity'. This concept, which is virtually absent from *The Holy Family* but which assumes increasing importance from the *Theses on Feuerbach* onwards, rapidly came to dominate Marx's theory of knowledge and his view of the relation between men and their environment. For Marx and Engels, 'Praxis' came to denote the dynamic, creative aspect of all human experience. Experience is not simply the passive acceptance of static data, as the mechanical materialists profess, but a practical *activity*, which forms and *changes* the reality which it interprets. 'The chief defect of all previous materialism (including that of Feuerbach) is that things, reality, the sensible world, are conceived only in the form of *objects of observation*, but not as *human sense activity*, not as *practical activity*.'[2] Marx goes on to acknowledge that 'in opposition to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism'. Whose 'idealism' is Marx referring to? Conventionally, he is assumed to be referring to classical Hegelianism in general, but this answer fails to explain

[1] Arvon, op. cit., p. 147.

[2] Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, I.

why, at exactly *this* point in his development, in the spring of 1845, Marx should suddenly have been brought to perceive the inherent 'defect' of Feuerbachian materialism and to grasp the creative, revolutionary aspect of 'idealism'. One possibility, although it is admittedly no more than a possibility, is that his punctual revulsion from the dogmatic inertia of 'all previous materialism' was due to his cathartic encounter with Stirner. Fresh from his study of *Der Einzige*, impressed against his will by its author's critical destruction of the immobile abstractions of orthodox metaphysics, Marx was free to reject Stirner's subjectivism while absorbing and assessing the creative power of his dialectic. And at the beginning of 1845, if the philosophy of Feuerbach represented the highest expression of mechanistic materialism, the work of Stirner had notoriously carried the philosophy of dynamic 'idealism' to its most extreme point of development. It may, of course, be fanciful to suppose that *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* could have occupied so central a place in Marx's attention (although the scale of 'Saint Max' would seem to offer good grounds for such a supposition). Two things, however, are certain. *Der Einzige* was the last major publication of Young Hegelianism to appear before Marx's breach with that movement and with German philosophy in general; and it is from his breach with the Young Hegelians that the concept of 'Praxis' begins to play such a vital role in Marxist thought.[1] If this concept is even in part attributable to his encounter with Stirner; if, for example, the Marxist conception of truth as the instrument of men's social purposes can be shown to exhibit genealogical resemblances to The Unique One's pragmatic conception of 'truth' as the vehicle of his egoistic purposes; then with added reason it may be claimed on Stirner's behalf that, unforeseeably and involuntarily, he

[1] The term 'Praxis' is of course used by Marx before 1845; it occurs, for example, in his economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844, and in fact he first used the term in his doctoral dissertation of 1841. Like any concept, however, 'Praxis' arrived at its mature meaning in Marx's thought only after a process of evolution. It is fair to claim, therefore, that Marx's use of the concept in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology* specifically to distinguish his dynamic materialism from the passive materialism of Feuerbach marks a stage in his evolution of this concept which deserves to count as decisive.

ended up by making a notable contribution to the development of revolutionary socialism.

It would be possible to suggest other ways in which Stirner's ideas may have exerted a significant if unacknowledged influence on the early development of classical Marxism. Stirner's exposure of the endemic tendency of philosophical ideas, all of which are ultimately dependent for their existence on the concrete living thinker in whose mind they originate, to pose as autonomous realities with a life-history of their own; his demonstration that so-called moral 'rights', including the 'natural right' to property, are meaningless unless supported by active material *power*, which indeed renders them otiose; his attack on the negative liberal concept of 'freedom', which only amounts to 'freedom *from*' some restriction, and his insistence that 'freedom *to*' enjoy the goods one covets (which is identical with power) must be forcibly *taken*: all these are vividly echoed in Marx's repeated criticisms of the philosophical 'reification' of ideas; in his rejection of the bourgeois notion of property rights; in his conviction that it is always social power, and never abstract principle, by means of which social conflicts are ultimately resolved; and finally in Marx's rejection of the empty bourgeois concept of abstract 'freedom' in favour of the concrete freedom to create and enjoy the goods of society, as the sphere which a communist society will seek to enlarge. In all these ways, it might be argued, the public figure subsequently cut by Marx bears the tell-tale traces of his muffled but violent encounter with Stirner—an encounter in which, it might further be claimed, the philosophical corrections were not inflicted on only one side.

Be that as it may, there is already sufficient evidence (if the great bulk of 'Saint Max' were not in itself sufficient evidence) to show that in the year 1845, at this critical stage of his development, when his most fundamental ideas were going into the melting-pot, Marx took Stirner very seriously indeed as a moral thinker and as one of his most disturbing philosophical critics. It was never Marx's habit to acknowledge any intellectual debts he might owe to a contemporary, and where a debt was contracted he tended to attack the errors and shortcomings of his creditor with augmented

virulence and obduracy. The very follies of which Stirner had accused his contemporaries were the follies of which Marx in turn, with blistering mockery, accused Stirner himself, annihilating him with the very weapons which Stirner himself had patented. The extent to which Marx consciously recognized the validity of Stirner's moral cynicism and metaphysical scepticism, endorsing them by his own subsequent example, will now never be known with certainty. In the light of the seminal importance of *The German Ideology*, however, which has only recently come to be recognized (in the words of Roy Pascal) as 'the first systematic account of [Marx's and Engels'] view of the relationship between the economic, political, and intellectual activities of man, the first full statement of Marxism',[1] it may justifiably be surmised that future students of Marxism will increasingly be required to take account of the role played by Stirner in the early reorientation of its founders. There may now be no possibility of determining exactly what that role was. But any discussion of the origins of Marxism which failed to perceive that Stirner's momentary role was at least an intimate and disconcerting one would plainly be as undiscerning as it was incomplete.[2]

Stirner's debate with Marx and Engels has interest of another, and more *recherché*, kind. As will be argued in Chapter VIII, Stirner's world-view resembles, in a number of significant respects, the world-views advanced in the present century by certain prominent 'existentialist' thinkers, whose preoccupations and insights he may be said to have in some measure anticipated. While it would be misconceived to expect any close similarity between Stirner's moral and political views and those held by any twentieth century existentialist thinker, it is true to say that Stirner and the modern existentialists are moving inside the same philosophical perspec-

[1] R. Pascal (ed.), *The German Ideology*, editor's Introduction, p. ix.

[2] D. McLellan discusses Stirner's relation to the nascent Marxism in sec. 3 of the chapter entitled 'Max Stirner' in his *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, London, 1969, which appeared shortly after the completion of the present book. McLellan's brief but well-informed account is noteworthy for its clear perception that Stirner's contribution to the early development of Marxism deserves much closer attention than scholars have commonly given to it.

tive, that despite their differences they are addressing themselves to the same predicament. Now, if the philosophical posture of The Unique One can indeed be properly described as 'existential', both *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* and *The German Ideology* assume a new and unexpected relevance, for the debate of 1845 now transpires to be the earliest recorded dialogue between Marxism and a type of existential philosophy. In fact, of course, it would almost certainly be the very earliest dialogue, recorded or unrecorded, between Marxism and existentialism, and it would likewise represent the one and only historical occasion on which a Marxist judgment was passed on an existential philosophy by the founders of Marxism themselves.

Viewed in this light, Marx's censures of 'Saint Max' clearly presage the contemptuous hostility shown by modern Marxists towards existentialism. In the eyes of the contemporary Marxist existentialism is, as *Der Einzige* was to Marx himself, a corrupt and morbid form of idealism, the decadent ideology of a dying culture and a senile class. Its hysterical individualism, like that of Stirner, expresses the social despair of the petty-bourgeois whose pessimistic self-absorption it reflects, and its irresponsible subjectivism expresses the deliberate obscurantism of a class fleeing from the objective historical realities at the hands of which it has suffered agonizing social defeat. For the Marxist, existentialism represents a 'nihilism of the intellect'[1] which is the counterpart of the moral and political nihilism of the European petty-bourgeois at the end of his tether. Its frivolity echoes the moral collapse of a society which has entered its economic decline. As a philosophy, existentialism is purely negative, like the philosophy of Stirner it is devoid of real content and remote from the actual affairs of living men, which it wholly fails to understand, and its theoretical rejection of the civilization by which it has been produced only serves to disguise its fundamentally reactionary character and function. As one of the ideologies of capitalism in its eclipse, it must be swept away along with the putrescent social system on which it is parasitical.

Evidently, then, Marx's criticisms of Stirner furnish a highly

[1] M. Cornforth, *In Defence of Philosophy*, London, 1950, p. 241.

accurate prototype of the modern Marxist's criticisms of existentialism. Just as Stirner was well able in turn to furnish a scathing and deadly critique of the socialism of his day, however, so the contemporary existentialist is quick to detect and expose those features of Marxism which slander and confine the free individual in his unique creativity; and once again this conflict is presaged in the debate of 1845, although this time it is Stirner who, with astonishing accuracy, anticipates the leading points in the existentialist's indictment of Marxism. The existentialist rejects Marxism's claims to be 'objectively scientific' and to have dispensed with ethical and metaphysical presuppositions; he retorts that Marxists are simply unaware of their own presuppositions, which are as dogmatic as those of any moralist or metaphysician. In particular, Marxists operate with a conception (generally unstated) of 'human nature', apprehending man as inherently 'social' and essentially a 'worker', whereas the existentialist, like Stirner, contends that 'there is no human nature, because . . . man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself'.[1] The 'man' of dogmatic Marxism is man in a state of alienation to a fetishized 'Society', into whose narcotic anonymity he flees to escape the demands of his own contingency and the challenging responsibility of solitary choice. The man who loses himself in 'the mass' is the man who lives his life 'in bad faith', who refuses to face the crisis of his identity and from it to project himself towards personal authenticity. For the existentialist, as for Stirner, the 'man' of dogmatic Marxism is the man who has lost himself, or sold himself, to a collective and impersonal illusion. And finally, for the existentialist, as for Stirner, the metaphysical 'rebellion' of the defiant individual incomparably transcends the socialist 'revolution', which only results in a more profound and systematic enslavement of individuals as persons.

It would admittedly be fallacious to hypostatize 'the existentialist', as if there were a single set of priorities which were common to the members of a well-defined philosophical school called 'existentialism', when in reality there are as many varieties of

[1] J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, translated by P. Mairet, London, 1948, p. 28.

existentialism as there are existentialists; and it would be mistaken to suppose that Stirner's particular form of nihilistic egoism would in fact be endorsed by any given existentialist, however vigorously he might support Stirner's indictment of doctrinaire socialism. Nevertheless, existentialism *is* a philosophical idiom, and the dispute between Stirner and socialism *was* conducted, on Stirner's side, in an idiom at least cognate to that of existentialism. Stirner's relationship to existentialism and his place in the existentialist tradition will be the subject of a later chapter, while in Part Three of the present book, which will be devoted to a critical consideration of Stirner's philosophy viewed as a coherent world-outlook, there will be space to discuss the nihilist's attitude to society and its purposes. Here it need only be noted that at the present time, when a number of leading existentialist thinkers are seeking to reinterpret Marxism in the light of existentialist phenomenology, when for example Sartre is actively and publicly seeking to effect a synthesis between Marxist sociology and the existentialist dialectic, there is greater reason than ever for a fundamental study of Marx's original response to the only existential philosophy which he ever encountered. If the result of such a study were to fructify the dialogue between these two great contemporary thought-forms, then the martyrdom of 'Saint Max' would not have been utterly without historic point.

CHAPTER VI

STIRNER AND THE ANARCHISTS

HISTORIANS have never agreed about Stirner's place in the history of philosophy. They have disagreed about whether his place should be a major or a minor one, a central place or a marginal one in the evolution of certain modern moral and social ideas, and they have even been far from unanimous in determining to which of the broad currents of Eu opean thought his work might with accuracy be said to belong. Today, his language and his whole philosophical approach seem plainly to locate him somewhere in that line of thinkers whose unseasonable writings prefigured themes since made more urgent and explicit in the works of contemporary existentialists. In 1845, as a philosopher of radical self-consciousness, he was judged just as plainly to be a representative, albeit the most extreme and bizarre representative, of that specific branch of neo-Hegelianism which realized its limited historical significance in producing the still-born movement known as 'the philosophy of pure Criticism'. At the beginning of the present century, as men became fascinated by the ideas of Nietzsche and began to cultivate philosophies of self-will, it was as a precursor and near-neighbour of Nietzsche that Stiruer was received into the historian's attention. Perhaps there is an ironic justice in the fact that historians have been thus baffled by a philosopher whose perennial motive was to elude definition and whose chief characteristics were his systematic rootlessness and ambiguity.

There is, however, one persistent current of European thought to which Stirner has been more commonly assigned than to any other. It is among the founders and luminaries of modern anarchism that a place is most frequently reserved for the author of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, which 'of all the libertarian classics', in the opinion of George Woodcock, 'remains the

expression of a point of view that belongs clearly to one end of the varied spectrum of anarchist theory'.[1] There is no doubt that Stirner and his book are more widely known among students of anarchist theory than among any other group of serious students. Whether his philosophy can properly be described as 'anarchist' when viewed as a coherent whole in its own right is quite another matter, and Woodcock admits that 'at first sight Stirner's doctrine seems strikingly different from that of other anarchist thinkers'.[2] Nevertheless it has been generally accepted that 'there are elements in Stirner's thought that bring him clearly into the anarchist tradition and which have given him considerable influence in libertarian circles during the present century'.[3] For Basch, 'Stirner is an anarchist individualist and, despite his words of pity for the proletariat, an aristocrat, while the theoreticians of contemporary anarchism are all democrats and communists. But he is an anarchist as they are.'[4] The anarchic elements in Stirner's thought are apparently pronounced enough for Arvon even to declare him 'to have been anarchism's most original and most consistent thinker'.[5]

It is not entirely easy to see how Stirner came to be so widely regarded as a patriarchal figure among the philosophers of anarchism. By historians of anarchism, by Eltzbacher, Woodcock, Arvon, and other scholars who set out to narrate the development of anarchist ideas or analyse their content, he is consistently reported to occupy an eminent place in the anarchist pantheon; but when we turn to the principal leaders of the anarchist movement themselves, when we interrogate the works of the Proudhons and the Kropotkins or consult the lives of the Bakunins and the Tolstoys, we find scarcely any evidence to show that the principles or practice of historic anarchism has been significantly modified by the ideas of *Der Einzige* at any main point. A historic encounter did indeed take place between Stirner and Proudhon; but it took the form of a violent conflict between two philosophies

[1] G. Woodcock, *Anarchism*, ch. 4.
[2] Woodcock, loc. cit.
[3] Woodcock, loc. cit.
[4] V. Basch, *L'Individualisme anarchiste: Max Stirner*, Paris, 1904, pp. 3–4.
[5] H. Arvon, *L'Anarchisme*, Paris, 1951, p. 39.

which were discordant in almost every possible respect. There is no reason to believe that Kropotkin, to whose ethical, social, and humanitarian concerns Stirner would have been utterly antagonistic, had any close acquaintance with *Der Einzige* and the egoistic system of its author, or that he would have felt any regard for them if he had. While Stirner's philosophy may have some tenuous affinities with the revolutionary destructiveness of Bakunin, the latter's passionate zeal for social justice and his lifelong commitment to popular emancipation could hardly be further removed from Stirner's self-preoccupation and egoistic detachment; and while Bakunin's Young Hegelian connections in Berlin during his stay there in 1840–41, his collaboration with Ruge on the *Deutsche Jahrbücher*, and his meetings with Marx and Proudhon in Paris between 1844 and 1848 all make it probable that he had acquired at least some distant knowledge of Stirner and his ideas, they scarcely show that he was ever familiar with the finished philosophy of *Der Einzige*, far less that he would have been likely to receive it with sympathy or respect. Finally, the Christian anarchism of Tolstoy, for whom anarchist co-operation was to inaugurate a new mode of moral being, is flagrantly irreconcilable with Stirner's nihilistic egoism, his contempt for altruism, for Christian love, and his rejection of any mode of being which is not originally, uniquely, and recklessly his own.

Aware of the profound differences which divide Stirner's philosophy from the classic teachings of historic anarchism, most historians have sought to acknowledge and clarify these differences by defining Stirner's philosophy as a form of 'individualist anarchism'. By 'individualist anarchism' they intend to signify an ethic of extreme individualism which, in common with other varieties of anarchism, is marked by a violent distrust of authority in general and by total opposition to the State in particular. Now, there are three phases in the history of individualist anarchism in which scholars have particularly claimed to detect the influence of Stirner's ideas: firstly in the individualist ethic of Benjamin Tucker and certain other American anarchists about the turn of the century; then in the aesthetic individualism of a few *fin de siècle* poets and *littérateurs*; and lastly in the nihilistic motives of certain

criminal terrorists whose activities gained considerable notoriety about the same period. Unquestionably Tucker had early possessed himself of a detailed knowledge of *Der Einzige*, for when he undertook the publication of Byington's translation of the book in 1907 he declared it to be 'the most important piece of literature he had ever issued'.[1] Unquestionably there is a close and perhaps direct connection between Stirner's sovereign egoism and Tucker's basic premise that for every man the supreme law is the law of his own self-interest. Tucker declares not only that 'the anarchists . . . are egoists in the farthest and fullest sense', but also that 'the anarchists totally discard the idea of moral obligation', for 'so far as inherent right is concerned, might is its only measure'.[2] For Tucker, however, the self-interest of each individual requires the equal liberty of all, and he rapidly concludes, with bland composure, that 'it is our duty to respect others' rights, assuming the word right to be used in the sense of the limit which the principle of equal liberty places upon might'.[3] In fact Tucker's hypothetical egoism rapidly becomes so tempered by his practical aim of prescribing stable constitutional foundations for a possible anarchist society that he is at last prepared to admit a variety of 'legal norms' based on the general will, which may enforce them upon recalcitrant individuals by every means found to be necessary. The chief of these legal norms is the principle that contracts must be respected: 'I deem the keeping of promises such a important matter that only in the extremest cases would I approve their violation'.[4] Despite his professed 'egoism', then (which he is more likely to have derived from his compatriot Josiah Warren's theory of 'the sovereignty of the individual' than from Stirner's unprincipled and asocial solipsism), Tucker is a moralist and a social reformer. A whole spiritual world separates his version of moral egoism, which permits the self-realization of one only on the condition that he respects the individuality of all, from the absolute egoism of Stirner, who repudiates all principles, including the

[1] See P. Eltzbacher, *Anarchism*, Freedom Press ed., London, 1960, Editor's Preface by J. J. Martin, p. xiii.

[2] B. R. Tucker, *Instead of a Book*, New York, 1893, p. 24.

[3] Tucker, op. cit., p. 59.

[4] Tucker, op. cit., p. 51.

principle that I must respect in others what I demand that they respect in me. In short, whereas Tucker, in common with other individualist anarchists, is ultimately concerned to construct a new social doctrine, Stirner is concerned only to create and assert *himself*.

At first glance the vogue enjoyed by Stirner's ideas in certain literary circles, whose members flirted picturesquely with anarchist philosophy in the closing decade of last century, might seem to evince a more immediate and personal attraction which he exercised. Stirner's work was reintroduced to the German public by John Henry Mackay, his chief admirer, his devoted biographer, and himself a novelist and poet of some note, who bravely spread his master's teachings (as he understood them) among the small groups of literary intellectuals whom a common passion for libertarian ideals would over shorter or longer periods assemble and inspire. In France, where writers like Valéry, artists like the Pissarros, and symbolist poets like Mallarmé were all at one time or another fascinated by the anarchist philosophy of art and life, the doctrines of *Der Einzige* were guaranteed a sympathetic and responsive audience. Intoxicated by Stirner's book, Laurent Tailhade, the anarchist poet, even went so far as to immortalize it in verse:

> *L'Unique et sa Propriété*
> Suffit pour parer mon été.

In an era dominated by a sombre social determinism on the one hand and by an impersonal abstract idealism on the other, it may have been natural that artists should be attracted to anarchist individualism as a protest against the progressive dehumanization of modern civilization. In England, Oscar Wilde denounced the social virtues of charity and benevolence as passionately as he denounced the social uses of wealth and authority, all of which strangle originality and suffocate the soul of the creative individual. Clearly, to aesthetic malcontents in revolt against the joyless morality of a colourless age the flamboyant individualism of Stirner, with its celebration of abandoned self-enjoyment and its exultation in the originality of the unique subject who makes of his life a work of art, was tuned to sound like a savage cry of sheer

delight in the sensualities of existence and of triumphant liberation from the conventions of a banal culture. But did any of this amount to a victorious acceptance of the philosophy which Stirner had so carefully described in *Der Einzige*? Or was it simply that certain notes struck in *Der Einzige* happened to chime with the restive mood of a generation which received its main impulse from deeper and more basic sources of cultural change? It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Stirner's book reflected rather than formed the individualist temper of *fin de siècle* aestheticism, that those literary spirits who embraced some of its themes did so because it could be adapted to adorn their favourite postures rather than because they were intellectually or morally convinced by the world-view it enshrined. It is even dubious whether these postures deserve to be called anarchistic. No doubt they embodied some extravagant forms of individualism, and no doubt the contempt for authority and the hatred of convention by which they were accompanied are among the negative features of a genuinely anarchist posture, but the positive content of a truly anarchist outlook was in the main conspicuously absent or given only a superficial and nominal assent. If Stirner's claims to be a founder of modern individualist anarchism rested on the testimony of its alleged literary representatives, they would have at best a slender prospect of being upheld.

It is still more fanciful to ascribe the anarchist terrorism of the 1890s, even in part, to the latent influence of Stirner's ideas. There may be a superficial resemblance between the resolute and solitary French or Italian anarchist, determined to destroy by bomb or assassin's bullet what he knew reason and debate were impotent to change, and the delinquent figure of The Unique One, who takes by criminal means what the State in its bigotry would refuse him. 'A self-possessive man cannot desist from being a criminal', says Stirner, 'for crime is his life.'[1] There may also seem to be resemblances between the 'association of egoists' and those groups of anarchist bandits who in the early years of the present century engaged in large-scale armed robbery in order to harass the capitalist enemy and at the same time provide financial support for

[1] D.E., p. 236.

the popular cause. These resemblances are imaginary, however. It is, to say the least, highly improbable that the simple Ravachol or the demented Vaillant, far less the desperadoes of the Bonnet gang, were moved to embark on their careers of political assassination or organized larceny as a result of any profound study of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*. Of course, if the anarchist gangsters (as there is some reason to suspect) were often motivated more by personal gain than by revolutionary idealism, then to that extent they were behaving as egoists in Stirner's sense: but to that extent they were not behaving as committed anarchists. In some respects the 'association of egoists' is a prototype for the rapacious gangsterism prevalent in the Chicago of the 1920s, but in no respect is it a prototype for the idealistic gangsterism so piously saluted by the anarchist movement of the 1900s. While Stirner would certainly not have shrunk from the *methods* used in making 'propaganda by deed', he would have had scant respect for or interest in the *purpose* which they served. To be employed in making propaganda of any kind is to allow oneself to be possessed by a 'phantasm', in this case the phantasm of an ideal human society governed by perfect social justice. The arbitrary act of a criminal Unique One bodies forth his sublime irresponsibility and his Olympian indifference to the society of whose laws he is defiant. The campaign of terrorism waged by the fanatical anarchist, and generally resulting in his vain self-sacrifice, is by contrast the act of a man whose folly is equalled only by the despotism of the fixed ideas which possess him.

The philosophy of Stirner, then, cannot be said to have made any seriously effective contribution to the development of historic anarchism. While his name may temporarily have been a kind of watchword among certain peripheral groups of dilettante anarchists, it is doubtful if any major anarchist theoretician or practitioner has ever been lastingly influenced by his ideas on any issue of substance—although many have at one time or another paid lip-service to some bowdlerized image of his Unique One. Stirner's role among anarchists has always been decorative rather than real. Perhaps this is scarcely surprising, since the philosophy of *Der Einzige*, however numerous its points of intersection with a

truly anarchist philosophy, is essentially at one only with itself and is in the last analysis utterly incompatible with any philosophy which, like anarchism, takes as its starting-point the highest welfare of humanity as a whole. The reason that Stirner has never received more than solemn genuflections from his *soi-disant* anarchist admirers, the reason that he has had no purposeful anarchist followers, is that his philosophy, whatever its appearances, is fundamentally at variance with the inspiration and ethos of any genuinely anarchist world-outlook.

With all due respect to Eltzbacher, there undoubtedly are several features which are common to any world-outlook that deserves to be called 'anarchist'. While it may not be true that 'anarchism is an epiphenomenon of socialism',[1] it is undoubtedly true that anarchists, like socialists, generally begin from a criticism of existing society and end with a vision of some desirable future society: like socialists, anarchists are primarily concerned with the transfiguration of society and the regeneration of its members. Anarchists tend to be rationalists, convinced that human beings are ultimately amenable to the sweet voice of reason, and idealists, often nourished by the myth of an Arcadian past in which men shared a free life of simple virtue and nearly always inspired by the vision of a utopian future in which men's natural liberty and dignity will be finally and universally restored. While he may recognize the need for some form of social organization, the anarchist always condemns *government*, where 'government' is understood to be that artificial and highly rigid form of social organization which places its ultimate reliance upon *coercion*. The anarchist is an inveterate enemy of *authority*, especially where authority implies the ultimate right of society to regulate the behaviour of individuals by brute force. Anarchism is thus opposed to the State as a means of establishing social order, even where the State in question is the beneficent organ of a popular democracy, and to law as a means of securing social justice, even where the laws in question are the liberal edicts of enlightened magistrates. In general, anarchism is opposed to property, in so far

[1] Arvon, op. cit., p. 13.

as property represents a classic instrument of economic exploitation and social inequality.

Unlike the nihilist, who denies all natural law and repudiates all moral principle, the anarchist typically affirms the existence of a moral sense in men which acts as the link binding mankind in a stable and brotherly community. Naturally social in their needs and instincts, men have an innate respect and sympathy for one another which are the immanent springs of humanity's abiding concern for private wellbeing and public justice. Anarchism therefore requires, not a lower, but an infinitely higher standard of ethical conduct from each individual. Since anarchists above all prize those values of personal liberty and spontaneity which they believe to be the conditions of any genuinely human life, the ethical standard which they adopt is one based on the free self-regulation of each individual as an autonomous moral agent, and this standard requires an infinitely greater degree of self-vigilance and responsibility on the part of each moral agent than does the conventional morality of existing society with its external sanctions and its distrust of personal initiative. An anarchist community is one in which social conflict and economic competition have been replaced on every plane by the mutual aid and fraternal co-operation of free equals who voluntarily undertake those tasks on behalf of their fellows which they know themselves to be best fitted to discharge. Anarchism thus seeks to replace an artificial and external political unity by a spontaneous and living moral unity.

With such an understanding of man and such a vision of his possibilities, anarchists have eagerly welcomed philosophies of protest such as Stirner's, seizing upon those elements in them which seemed to confirm their own hatred of oppression and fervour for individuality. When Stirner declares that 'over the portal of our time stands the sign, "*Get the value out of thyself*" ',[1] they greet this as a striking declaration of the anarchist principle that the true function of society is to create the conditions in which individuals will be able fully to realize their highest potentialities. They see in Stirner's fluid and protean 'association of

[1] D.E., p. 369.

egoists', with its aversion to that 'wretched stability' which seeks to hinder the individual in his 'flow and dissolution',[1] an imaginative epitome of the anarchist protest against all rigid and insensitive forms of social organization. They applaud his scornful exposure of all the hollow conventions by which society seeks to sanctify property in the hands of its possessors and to assure it against the rapacity of the dispossessed. In Stirner's calculated insolence towards 'the sacred' in all its forms, they profess to find an image of the anarchist's defiant hostility to authority of every kind and however exercised. Above all, in Stirner's calm recognition that the so-called majesty of the law is nothing but a disguise for the arbitrary violence practised by the State against the individual, and in his vehement reiteration that 'we two are enemies, the State and I',[2] anarchists willingly believe that they have discovered a powerful ally, if not a natural leader, in their struggle against the legal and political exploitation of mankind.

These beliefs are illusory, however. The self-realization of Stirner's Unique One in no wise resembles the purposive endeavours of the man who earnestly seeks to realize in his own person the highest values of which he is capable. 'From now on', says Stirner, 'the question is not how one is to realize one's true self, but how one is to dissolve oneself, to live oneself out.'[3] For the egoist, it is not so much a question of *realizing* himself as of *asserting* himself, of enjoying himself, of 'squandering' himself in his enjoyments, and the concept of an ideal human nature, even a purely personal ideal of individual perfection to which he may aspire, is one which he rejects with all the equanimity of a man who is content to take himself as he is and to spend himself as he can. Similarly, Stirner's denial of property rights is superficially so acceptable to anarchists only because they misunderstand it or wilfully ignore the conclusions drawn from it. Stirner is not in the least desirous of abolishing property rights in order to restore to humanity the fruits of the earth and of human labour, unjustly distrained by the institution of private property. In fact, The Unique One's whole effort is exclusively directed to increasing and enjoying his own private 'property', and if he denies the existence

[1] D.E., p. 229. [2] D.E., p. 210. [3] D.E., pp. 375–6.

of property 'rights' this is only because he equates 'property' with the operative *power* to control a d enjoy the thing possessed: 'the property question is solved only by the war of all against all'.[1] To say that power is the only right which The Unique One recognizes is of course really to say that he recognizes no such thing as 'right'. 'Property is what is mine . . . I look on your property as *my* property, in which I need to "respect" nothi g.'[2] 'Property, therefore, should not and cannot be abolished; it must rather be torn from ghostly hands and become *my* property.'[3] When the anarchist denies property rights, he does so because he deplores the misery and degradation caused by economic inequality a d exploitation. When Stirner denies property rights, on the other hand, he is merely announcing that his cupidity will not permit itself to be curbed by any foolish scruples about legal titles or moral ownership.

It might seem as if Stirner and the anarchists were at least agreed in their wholehearted repudiation of authority and its uses. For the anarchist, the State is 'one of the chief causes of misery in the modern world'.[4] By identifying justice with the collective power of the citizen-body, it substitutes the rule of squalid force for the rule of candour and reason as the principle governing human relations, which it thereby cheape s and coarse s. For Stirner also, the divine authority of the State is at bottom a vile masquerade which the egoist will make it his business to discomfit. Stirner's declaration of war against the State and his systematic disregard of its laws are not, however, motivated by a y passion for human dignity or concern for the integrity of the individual, which are the foundations of the anarchist attitu de. He simply sees in the State an omniprese t threat to his own private interests, which are continuously jeopardized by its prying and officious agents, and an insidious challenge to his self-possession, which it constantly tries to seduce by hypocritical sermons about loyalty and civic duty. Unlike the anarchist, who will be satisfied with nothing less than the historic dissolution of the State and the final overthrow of the tyranny of law, Stirner's Unique One sees no

[1] D.E., p. 303. [2] D.E., p. 289. [3] D.E., p. 303.
[4] Bertrand Russell, *Roads to Freedom*, London, 1918, p. 65.

reason to injure himself by a public crusade against authority when his ends can be just as well achieved by *cheating* the State and *evading* its laws. The Unique One only troubles himself about political oppression when he personally is among those who are oppressed. Like the anarchist, Stirner is opposed to authority, because authority seeks to gain a foothold in the soul itself, dividing the individual from himself by winning his respect for the moral claims which authority makes on him. Unlike the anarchist, however, Stirner is by no means opposed to the use of *power*. Others will use their power against me, a fact which it is pointless to varnish or deplore, and I will use all my power against them, without qualm or inhibitions. 'What I can extort for myself, I will extort for myself.'[1]

Clearly, then, when partisans of anarchism seek to enrol Stirner in the anarchist cause on the grounds that his defiance of everything sacred is an example of anarchist opposition to authority; or because they find in his systematic subversion of the prevailing morality a foretaste of the anarchist social revolution; or because they profess to see in his 'association of egoists' the design for a future anarchist society: these partisans of anarchism are doomed to disenchantment. There are undoubtedly resemblances between the formulae of anarchism and the formulae in which Stirner chooses to clothe his personal programme of self-evaluation and self-display. But Stirner's philosophy differs crucially from that of anarchism, both in the nature of the project which it represents and in the methods by which he intends to accomplish it. Stirner is concerned, not to regenerate society or transfigure human life, but purely and simply to define and assert himself alone, solely for the sake of asserting himself. He means to undertake, not a policy of social action or even a symbolic gesture on behalf of his oppressed fellows, but a purely personal enterprise of self-appropriation and self-aggrandizement, for which the conceptual exploits narrated in *Der Einzige* represent a kind of metaphysical rehearsal. Thus Stirner's programme of wilful desecration, far from reflecting an anarchist disgust for authority as an instrument of human purposes, in fact permits the most brutal acts of coercion and deceit; the

[1] D.E., p. 244.

'insurrection' in which his Unique One daily engages, far from adumbrating a form of the anarchist social revolution, in reality merely designates The Unique One's chosen course of heartless frivolity and cri inal irresponsibility; and the 'egoistic associations' which The Unique One promiscuously forms, far from illustrating the quality of human relationships in some future anarchist idyll, are in fact intended to depict The Unique One's attitude to those provisional and exploitive relationships which he may at any time contract for his own selfish advantage or amusement.

There are innumerable other points at which the philosophy of The Unique One and the philosophy of anarchism are in direct collision. Whereas the anarchist considers himself to be preaching certain ultimate truths about man and society, for Stirner 'there is not a single truth which endures before me . . . they are words, nothing but words'.[1] Stirner is correspondingly indifferent to the cause of freedom of thought, which the anarchist champions so zealously. He is actively at enmity, not only with the particular moral and social ideals which anarchists embrace, but with the whole process of acknowledging and submitting to ideals of any kind, which he considers to be the very type and meaning of self-alienation. For Stirner, the anarchists are to be numbered among 'the possessed'. Even when the moral principles which they affirm are deemed to be immanent in the society whose affairs they regulate, they always and of their nature claim to transcend the peculiar interests of any arbitrary individual, and as such they inevitably do violence to his self-possession and self-centred uniqueness. To the high moral earnestness of the anarchists Stirner opposes the deliberate flippancy and irresponsibility of The Unique One. Sanctimonious talk of 'moral autonomy' and 'individual self-regulation' is mere cant, since in the last resort no anarchist society, however permissive, could tolerate the presence of an individual who systematically employed his 'autonomy' in predatory acts against his neighbours and since an 'autonomy' which one cannot use, or abuse, as one pleases is from the start a subterfuge and a sham. The 'freedom' which the anarchist holds to be the supreme social and individual good Stirner does not in

[1] D.E., p. 406.

any case consider to be particularly desirable. 'What use is your freedom, if it brings you nothing?', asks Stirner. 'I have no objection to freedom, but I wish you more than freedom; you should not only *be rid of* what you do not want, you should also *have* what you want.'[1] Thus even if anarchist freedom meant the freedom to do exactly as one pleased, Stirner would judge it to be at best an empty gift—and *as* a 'gift', conferred by society and not fearlessly seized by the individual, something to be scorned. However, the freedom so cherished by anarchists generally means no more than the freedom to develop into one of the types of person which anarchism takes as its models of human nature. Anarchism frees me to become brotherly, upstanding, industrious and true, but it by no means frees me to become harsh, secretive, negligent or false, and should I develop such traits an anarchist society will judge itself to have the duty to redeem me, by persuasion, edifying example, education, moral pressure, or any other curative means. Now, according to Stirner this would be to place me 'at the standpoint of *should*', to insist that I *should* become 'a whole, free man'; and to say that 'men *should* be free' is covertly 'to proclaim a new *religion*', for 'the religious essentially consists in dissatisfaction with the *present* man', religion always aims 'to *make something out of* us'.[2] As the refusal of religion, so defined, and therefore as the refusal of humanistic religion in whatever shape or form, Stirner's philosophy must clearly be considered to represent also a refusal of that latter-day form of religious faith preached by modern anarchists.

Above all Stirner rejects the anarchist dream of perfect social harmony. If we strip men—Christians and Jews, capitalists and workers, old and young—of the differences which divide them, we shall find that in the ultimate residue of their absolute uniqueness each remains utterly incommensurate with all others and utterly distinct from them in his interests. 'The last and most decided opposition is that of unique individual against unique individual'.[3] Stirner therefore rejects the anarchist ideal of universal love and brotherly co-operation. 'I would rather rely on men's selfishness than on their goodwill, compassion, pity,

[1] D.E., pp. 183–4. [2] D.E., pp. 282–3 [3] D.E., p. 243.

and so on. . . . Let us not aspire to community, but to *one-sidedness*. Let us not seek that all-embracing parish, "human society", but let us seek in others only means and organs which we may use as o r property'.[1] It is not merely certain obnoxious forms of social organization which Stirner repudiates: it is the very idea of 'society', of a social life, it is 'community' as such, the idea of common interests and a social good which he rejects with the exclamation, 'Of what concern to me is the common weal?'[2] In the words of Lachmann: 'The dissolution of society in every form, State, nation, people, family, humanity, etc., is the necessary condition for the solitary individual, the egoist, to come into his own and to live a f ll and authentic life.'[3] This does not mean, however, that Stirner, like some crazed terrorist preaching apocalyptic doom, wishes to bring about a return to primeval chaos by actually *destroying* society. Society is 'dissolved' for the egoist when he has denuded it of its moral authority over him, when he is prepared to *use* its machinery for his own p rposes without regard to the social p rposes for which it was established. To say that society is 'dissolved' is neither more nor less than to say that 'for me no one, not even my fellow-man, is a person to be respected . . . but solely an *object* . . . an interesting or uninteresting object, useful or useless'.[4] Thus the fundamental identity of the highest interests of all men and the ultimate moral equality of all men are two of the cardinal postulates of anarchist ethics which Stirner contemptuously repudiates. 'Community, as the "goal" of all previous history, is an impossibility', he declares. 'No man is my equal, for I regard him, like all other beings, as my property.'[5] Basch correctly distinguishes all other forms of individualism, which postulate a basic human nat re as the common foundation for those natural rights which all equally enjoy, from the unrelenting individualism of Stirner, whose egoist, in his own absolute uniqueness, is utterly disparate from and incongruent with every other being.[6]

[1] D.E., pp. 363–4. [2] D.E., p. 248.

[3] B. Lachmann, *Protagoras, Nietzsche, Stirner: ein Beitrag zur Philosophie des Individualismus und Egoismus*, in *Bibliothek für Philosophie*, vol. 9, p. 60.

[4] D.E., p. 365. [5] D.E., pp. 364–5. [6] See Basch, op. cit., pp. 265–70.

Not only, then, is it erroneous to describe Stirner as an 'anarchist': the philosophy of anarchism and the philosophy of The Unique One are in almost every respect virtually irreconcilable. How did it come about that the author of *Der Einzige*, who on almost every page sets his face implacably against humanitarian and socialist ideals, should have been historically confused with dedicated revolutionaries like Proudhon and Bakunin, who sought, by peaceful or violent means, to accomplish the emancipation of the human race and its regeneration within a framework of personal dignity and social equality? This catastrophic misapprehension may be traced back at least to Engels, whose memory must have been more than usually clouded when he came to write those portions of 'Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy' which deal with the intellectual situation in the Germany of the 1840s. In that essay he refers to Stirner as 'the prophet of contemporary anarchism', adding, without a scrap of evidence, that 'Bakunin has taken a great deal from him'.[1] It is nearly incredible that the part-author of so vast and detailed a work as 'Saint Max' should have so completely forgotten the character and intentions of its peremptory subject. But what are we to make of his statement that 'Stirner remained a curiosity, even after Bakunin blended him with Proudhon and labelled the blend "anarchism" '?[2] This fantastic suggestion, that Stirner's ideas should have been fused with those of the despised Proudhon by someone whose whole career bore the stamp of that moral fanaticism which Stirner had pitied as a kind of suicidal dementia, can only be attributed to the failing clarity of a mind which had always been more imaginative than scholarly. So gross a lapse can hardly be excused. There is perhaps more excuse for John Henry Mackay, who was a poet and laid no claim to be a historian of philosophy. However, it is probably owing above all to the devoted labours of Mackay, who innocently read into *Der Einzige* his own passionate beliefs in anarchist individualism, that Stirner has since been generally regarded as one of the doyens of nineteenth century anarchism. Probably the fact that the rediscovery of Stirner at the end of last century coincided with a

[1] Engels, op. cit., sec. I.

[2] Engels, op. cit., sec. IV.

resurgence of fashionable interest in anarchist individualism also contributed accidentally to this misconception—a misconception which was of course rendered the more easy by the numerous features of Stirner's philosophy which do actually bear superficial resemblances of some sort to many of the leading ideas of anarchism. Certainly, critics and historians of anarchism, from Bernstein in the 1890s to Joll in the 1960s, have persistently treated *Der Einzige* as an anarchist manifesto and have tried, with varying degrees of strain, to appraise its doctrines from within the anarchist perspective. It is hardly surprising that writers sympathetic to anarchism have experienced acute embarrassment when trying to explain some of Stirner's more cynical utterances, while those writers who are on the whole critical of anarchism have tended to find in Stirner only 'an obscure German philosopher' who 'was not a very important thinker nor a very interesting one'.[1] Any attempt to judge Stirner from within the anarchist perspective and by the categories of anarchism is bound to issue in a misjudgment.

Some historians have implicitly recognized this. Impressed, like so many chroniclers of anarchism, by the verbal coincidence of Stirner's formulae with so many of the formulae of anarchism, they have nevertheless obliquely acknowledged, in various ways, their awareness of the profound antagonism between the philosophy of Stirner and any genuinely anarchist outlook. Joll, for example, who describes Stirner as an 'individualist anarchist', relates his influence on 'a few intellectuals, around the turn of the century' to that exercised by the 'individualism' of Ibsen, Nietzsche, and Gide. He is understandably driven to conclude that 'the whole point of anarchism in the 1890s was that it was not a coherent political or philosophical movement', since it 'owed its attraction to the very fact that it embraced so many disparate individuals and temperaments'.[2] In his place, another might well conclude that the incoherence is produced by attempting to stretch the term 'anarchism' to include such independent thinkers as Ibsen and Nietzsche, and for that matter Stirner, who were far

[1] J. Joll, *The Anarchists*, London, 1964, pp. 171–2.
[2] Joll, op. cit., p. 173.

from describing themselves as anarchists, who played no part in the historic anarchist movement, and whose ideas were in many respects opposed to those of anarchism. The classic example of this fallacy is to be found in the treatise of Victor Basch, *L'Individualisme anarchiste: Max Stirner.* With much ingenuity, Basch strives to show how 'anarchist individualism' results from a synthesis of anarchism and ethical individualism, but when he comes to specify the nature and contents of 'anarchist individualism' it is notable that these turn out to be neither more nor less than the views which he has designated as those characteristic of Stirner. One is left wondering whether 'anarchist individualism' has any independent signification, for if the phrase merely serves as a new designation for the philosophy of Stirner it is scarcely illuminating to learn that the author of *Der Einzige* was an anarchist individualist. On the other hand, Basch is apparently so ready to exploit the elasticity of the term that at one point he appears to enrol, not only Nietzsche and Ibsen, but even Protagoras, Hobbes, and Spinoza as apostles or predecessors of 'anarchist individualism'. By this stage the term is being used to refer to almost any thinker who preaches an ethic of power, and Basch predictably ends up by compiling a list of the most eminent thinkers who, advocating an individualism of power, have been the historic representatives of the aristocratic principle in ethics, from Goethe and von Humboldt, through Carlyle and Emerson, to Stirner and Nietzsche. Even if all the thinkers cited by Basch could be said to have advocated an 'aristocracy of power' (which is at least questionable), as will be argued in the next chapter it is highly misleading to describe Stirner's ethic of power as 'aristocratic', and in any case a usage by which aristocratic power-philosophies were referred to as 'anarchist individualist' would seem to be quite inexplicable, not to say downright perverse. For Emma Goldmann, no doubt, Nietzsche's 'aristocracy was neither of birth nor of purse; it was of the spirit. In that respect Nietzsche was an anarchist, and all true anarchists were aristocrats'.[1] But for anyone less magnanimous in his use of terms it would perhaps be wiser to reserve the term 'anarchist', even when prefixed to

[1] E. Goldmann, *Living My Life*, London, 1932, vol. I, p. 194.

'individualist', for those thinkers whose concern for the anarchist ideals of man and society is greater than even the liveliest imagination could ascribe to Nietzsche or Stirner.

A philosopher may find some favour among bohemian intellectuals, his philosophy of self-expression may be turned into a kind of individualist cult among dissident aesthetes, his rejection of all moral values may be hailed by disenchanted freethinkers who are at war with convention: none of this, however, has any bearing on whether the philosopher in question is an anarchist or whether his philosophy may be correctly described as a species of anarchism. The only way in which The Unique One can be arrayed in the categories of anarchism is by distorting these categories to accommodate him or—and this is the method normally chosen—by mutilating Stirner's ideas beyond recognition. It may be that Stirner can be shown to belong to some coherent moral and intellectual tradition, of which he is a modern and distinctive exemplar. Callicles and Thrasymachus, it might be argued, professed in outline a morality which has been carried to its completion in the world-outlook of *Der Einzige*. It may be that between Stirner and Nietzsche there are resemblances which justify the historian in assigning both to a common philosophical curriculum. It may even be that Stirner's philosophy is ultimately identifiable as an instance, possibly the most perfect extant instance, of a generic philosophical attitude which may be aptly designated by the term 'nihilistic egoism'. What is quite certain is that his philosophy cannot on any grounds be regarded as an instance, even a maladroit or bizarre instance, of the generic attitude which is correctly designated by the term '*anarchist*'. The anarchists' rebellion is not Stirner's rebellion, and his cause is not their cause. The Unique One is the rebel without a cause, who, like God, is exclusively his own cause and who can therefore exclaim, against anarchism as against all other forms of commitment, '*Nothing* is more to me than myself!'

CHAPTER VII

STIRNER AND NIETZSCHE

If among philosophers of the nineteenth century there is one figure who in moral coloration and existential posture naturally invites comparison with Stirner, that figure would surely seem to be Friedrich Nietzsche. In an article entitled 'Max Stirner, the Predecessor of Nietzsche', Paul Carus declares that 'the strangest thing about his remarkable book [viz. *Der Einzige*] consists in the many resemblances with Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. . . . While Stirner was forgotten the same ideas transplanted into the volumes of the author of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* found an echo first in Germany and soon afterwards all over the world.'[1] Certainly, Mackay's rescue of Stirner from almost total oblivion could scarcely have been accomplished if his way had not been lit by the growing fame of Nietzsche's writings in the closing decade of last century. It was in the lustre shed by the Superman that the figure of The Unique One first became recognizable to men of the new generation. According to Basch, writing in 1904: 'Above all Stirner has profited from the immense reverberation which the ideas of Nietzsche have had in Europe . . . it was natural that a return should be made to the past and that first and foremost a search should be made among the thinkers of Germany for the precursors of Zarathustra's creator. And thus it was inevitable that *L'Unique et sa Propriété* should be disinterred, containing—gathered together, concentrated, and crystallized in bizarre but singularly expressive formulae—everything which in the variations of Nietzsche is continuous melody, everything which, in his crowd of fugitive, floating, and so to speak liquid aphorisms, amounts to a concrete teaching. . . . First of all, then, Stirner has counted as precursor of Nietzsche.'[2] This is a judgment which most students of

[1] *The Monist*, vol. XXI, pp. 376–7.

[2] Basch, *L'Individualisme anarchiste*, pp. ii–iii.

Stirner have shared and which must have seemed particularly self-evident about the turn of the century, when his ideas had just been brought swirling back into the European consciousness in the wake of the Nietzsche movement. As early as 1892 it was entirely natural for Paul Lauterbach, in his introduction to the Reclam edition of *Der Einzige*, to refer to Nietzsche as Stirner's 'great successor'.[1]

Numerous scholars have pointed to the many striking resemblances between the two thinkers. Each was a great solitary, who utterly rejected the existing culture and who sought to present, in his own person, a living alternative to the philistinism by which he was surrounded. Each relinquished a teaching career in order to devote himself, in lonely independence, to the definition and contemplation of his philosophy. The philosophical career of each ended early and abruptly; each spent his last years in a kind of twilight; and each died at a comparatively early age. Both Stirner and Nietzsche set out to recall philosophy to the situation of the existing individual who is striving to come to terms with his immediate experience and convert it into a philosophical solution which will remain true to the particular urgency of his original response. Both thinkers cast their unique and total choice on the present world of finite reality, rejecting with deliberate finality every type of transcendent, other-worldly solution which philosophy and religion have proposed. Both explore the dimensions of the moral universe to its scandalous extremes, discarding with brusque contempt the conventional banalities and dissimulations of the received moralities. Both profess an extreme hostility to institutional authority, which reaches its climax in their detestation of the modern State and the intrusive arrogance of its nominees. Both philosophers bear witness to conflict as the omnipresent and sure reality, which finds its most complete expression in the conflicts inherent in all human relations, and both refer the solution of these conflicts in the last resort to naked force, on which ultimately our transient notions of right and justice ineffectually depend. For both Nietzsche and Stirner, therefore, life is essentially self-assertion—

[1] D.E., Introduction by P. Lauterbach.

choice, resolution, and action—and both men are accordingly fascinated by that artistry of the will which creates and is created by the self-mastery of the sovereign individual.

Such innate resemblances account for the tendency, in the opening years of the present century, to regard Stirner primarily as an interesting but more limited and less heroic harbinger of the great Zarathustra, as a kind of premature Nietzsche without the Master's profound psychological insight and artistic genius. Not all critics who compared the ideas of the two men made comparisons which were favourable to Nietzsche, however. The contrast between the personalities and the distinctive styles of the two thinkers was sharply pointed by several critics, for nothing could be farther apart than Nietzsche's passionate agonies and Stirner's ironic calm, Nietzsche's aphoristic and intuitive literary style and the discursive, metaphysical dexterity of Stirner's philosophical idiom. For some, this was a contrast between the divine eloquence and daemonic imagination of one of the world'sspiritual prodigies on the one hand, and the repetitious, arid pedantry of an obscure schoolmaster on the other. For others, however, the contrast pointed in a different direction. In the opinion of Benedict Lachmann: 'By contrast with the style of Nietzsche, Stirner's work is written in clear, pregnant form and language, without ever lapsing into a dry academic style. Sharp, clear, spirited—the book is truly rousing and overpowering'.[1] And in the opinion of Mackay, who was an admirer of Nietzsche: 'To want to compare this confused spirit—eternally wavering, forever contradicting himself and reeling almost helplessly from truth to error—with the deep, clear, serene, fastidious genius of Stirner is an absurdity which is not worth serious refutation'.[2] For some critics, indeed, it was Stirner who unquestionably manifested the greater philosophical penetration and speculative power. After quoting the judgment of Eduard von Hartmann to the effect that 'not only is this brilliant work not inferior in respect of style to Nietzsche's work, but in respect of philosophical value it surpasses the latter a thousand times', Victor Basch concludes that 'if Nietzschewas the

[1] Lachmann, *Protagoras, Nietzsche, Stirner*, p. 38.

[2] J. H. Mackay, *Max Stirner: sein Leben und sein Werk*, 3rd ed., pp. 18–19.

poet and musician of intransigent individualism, Stirner sought to be its philosopher'.[1] Whether *Der Einzige* was regarded merely as a minor prelude to the great symphony of Nietzsche's works, however, or whether it was considered to rival these in many respects and perhaps surpass them in some, it was generally agreed that the two thinkers, Stirner and Nietzsche, were directly and intimately connected, both in their moral and metaphysical discontents and in the desperate remedies by which they sought to overcome them.

The affinities between the two philosophies were so evidently remarkable that many writers simply took for granted that Nietzsche's study of *Der Einzige* must have been close and sympathetic. As Karl Löwith observes: 'Stirner has often been compared with Nietzsche, to the point of asserting that Stirner was the "intellectual arsenal" from which Nietzsche derived his weapons.'[2] Löwith is presumably referring to such writers as Carus, who had spoken of Nietzsche's 'appropriating Stirner's thoughts' and had described Stirner as 'the author from whom Nietzsche drew his inspiration'.[3] Certainly it was for a time widely assumed that *Der Einzige* must have figured among the books which as a young man Nietzsche devoured in such quantities. In his introduction to the English translation of Stirner's book, J. L. Walker wrote: 'Nietzsche has been much spoken of as a disciple of Stirner. . . . Nietzsche cites scores or hundreds of authors. Had he read everything and not read Stirner?'[4]

But the truth would seem to be that Nietzsche had *not* read Stirner. He makes no mention of Srirner anywhere in his voluminous writings or in his correspondence. It may be 'easy to imagine', with Professor Löwith, 'that Nietzsche was so "economical". . . with his knowledge of Stirner because he was both attracted to and repelled by him, and did not want to be confused with him';[5] but an imaginative explanation for the lack of evidence can hardly itself be counted as evidence. Albert Lévy, in an authorit-

[1] Basch. op. cit., p. iii.
[2] K. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, Part One, ch. IV, sec. 2.
[3] Carus, op. cit., p. 396.
[4] *The Ego and his Own*, Introduction by J. L. Walker to 1st ed., 1907.
[5] Löwith, loc. cit

ative thesis, shows that *Der Einzige* was not among the many books borrowed by Nietzsche from the University Library of Basle when he was a professor there.[1] Moreover, Lévy reminds us, in the 1870s and 1880s, during Nietzsche's great period of creativity, Stirner's work was virtually unknown. In her biography of her brother, Frau Förster-Nietzsche (whose word, admittedly, now carries less weight than it once did) makes no mention of Stirner. It is true that Nietzsche once strongly recommended Baumgärtner, his favourite pupil at Basle, to read Stirner's book; but this would not be the first time that a professor drew a pupil's attention to a work which he himself had not read. Von Hartmann, indeed, thought it was possible that Nietzsche might have been stimulated to read *Der Einzige* as a result of his own discussion of Stirner in Volume 2 of his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, during the course of a chapter which was subsequently criticized by Nietzsche at some length in his *Thoughts Out of Season*. On the whole, however, it is more probable that Nietzsche's knowledge of Stirner was derived, at second hand, from Lange's *History of Materialism*, the same work in which Mackay first encountered Stirner's name. Nietzsche's admiration for Lange was well known, and although he might well have come across references to the author of *Der Einzige* in other writings, there seems no reason to suppose that his immediate knowledge of Stirner's ideas went any further than the impressionistic outline provided in a work such as Lange's. In fact, if we confine ourselves strictly to the overt evidence discoverable from Nietzsche's recorded life and writings, we are driven to the somewhat disappointing conclusion that he probably only ever possessed the vaguest knowledge of Stirner's philosophical ideas, gained at second hand as a young man, and that to all appearances he never felt moved to enlarge this early knowledge for utilization in his own philosophical programme.

This does not of course rule out the possibility that Nietzsche was worked upon by the influence of Stirner in some more indirect and subtle way, or invalidate the many enriching com-

[1] A. Lévy, *Stirner et Nietzsche*, Paris, 1904, ch. I, entitled 'Nietzsche, a-t-il connu Stirner?'

parisons which may be drawn between the two philosophers. In the process of evolution leading up to an epochal world-view like Nietzsche's there may operate a 'cunning of History', whereby the pertinent and formative contributions of separate and obscure individuals may be taken up, unnoticed, and resumed within the developing dialectic of the age, within which they may slowly and clandestinely resolve themselves, until they at last emerge, perhaps with altered and heightened significance, in the mature philosophy of the new time. Bibliographical data do not solve the real historical problem. In the words of Löwith, both Stirner and Nietzsche 'can be separated by an entire world and yet belong together through the inner consistency of their radical criticism of Christian humanitarianism'.[1] To this Löwith would add: 'Historically considered, the coincidence that Stirner's book appeared in the year of Nietzsche's birth seems as necessary as the connection between Nietzsche's attempt at a new beginning and the Nothing which is reached in Stirner'.[2] Stirner's book might have disappeared from the face of German philosophy for more than a generation, but the nihilism which was its seminal ingredient had been irreversibly secreted within the germinating ideology of the age, in the organic evolution of which it was henceforth to play a latent but essential part. Thus—although in a more complex and devious sense—it may well be justifiable to describe Stirner as a 'precursor' of Nietzsche and The Unique One as a 'prototype' of the Superman. And it may well be justifiable to seek, in the images and parables of Nietzsche, those concepts which reflect, in more extravagant and oracular form, the intransigent philosophical project of his neglected predecessor.

Consider, for example, Stirner's view of the philosopher's relationship to his philosophy, which is a special case of the believer's relationship to his beliefs or, still more generally, the mind's relationship to its objects. 'I sing', says Stirner, 'because I am a singer.'[3] 'How we toss things about is a matter of our *option*, of our *freewill* . . . every judgment which I pass on an object is the *creature* of my will.'[4] Ideas are The Unique One's

[1] Löwith, loc. cit. [2] Löwith, op. cit., Part One, ch. IV, introduction.
[3] D.E., p. 347. [4] D.E., pp. 393–4.

property, of which he disposes according to his pleasure or which he deploys to secure the maximum advantage for himself. He has no respect for them as autonomous 'truths': he has 'the courage, not to be a slave of truth',[1] and he always knows 'how to "put everything out of mind", if only to be able to—go to sleep'.[2] Compare this with Nietzsche's view that 'every great philosophy up till now has consisted of . . . a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography' and that his own philosophy, dramatized as an urgent, creative response to personally experienced problems, 'furnishes a decided and decisive testimony as to *who he is*'.[3] Nietzsche, of course, always regards 'intellectual integrity' as one of the free spirit's paramount virtues and eulogizes 'the intellectual conscience [which] the great majority of people lack';[4] as well as a creative artist, the Nietzschean hero is a seeker after truth. The truths which he proclaims, however, are by no means abstract and impersonal propositions objectively accessible to universal reason: it must be 'known at the outset how literally they are merely—*my* truths'.[5] But even 'my truths' must not be allowed to petrify within me until they become 'convictions', since 'convictions are prisons' and 'men of conviction are of no account whatever'; this is why 'great minds are sceptical'.[6] For Nietzsche, as for Stirner, 'the man of faith . . . cannot regard himself as an end . . . does not belong to himself'.[7] Whereas for Stirner, 'a jerk does me the service of the most careful thinking, a stretch of the limbs frees me from the torment of thoughts',[8] for Nietzsche it is a question of 'treating deep problems as I would a cold swim—quickly into them and quickly out again'.[9] And it is Nietzsche, not Stirner, who declares it to be 'nothing more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than semblance'.[10] Nietzsche's recognition of the pragmatic utility of conscious fictions, his obsession with 'the holy lie' as an instrument of 'the will to power',[11] his sceptical refusal to allow his beliefs to ossify into static principles, his conception of philosophy as a total

[1] D.E., p. 349. [2] D.E., p. 391. [3] F. W. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 6.
[4] Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, § 2. [5] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 231.
[6] Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, § 54. [7] Loc. cit. [8] D.E., p. 175.
[9] *The Joyful Wisdom*, § 381. [10] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 34.
[11] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 142.

existential response: all these are more than reminiscent of The Unique One's activity of capricious thinking which issues in 'proprietary truth', and they resound with more than an echo of his inventor's creative and exploitive attitude to knowledge in general and to his own philosophy in particular.

The theories of knowledge of both Stirner and Nietzsche are closely related to their metaphysical views. In Nietzsche's philosophy, 'the effort to formulate knowledge . . . answers the need to impose Being (the image of the stable ego) on the process of Becoming'.[1] 'The true philosophers are . . . legislators, who say "Thus *shall* it be!" ',[2] who set out, like Gods, to 'organize the chaos'.[3] Interpreting the world by our needs, we find that it derives its whole worth from the interpretations we impose upon it,[4] and because the creation of a significant order from a meaningless flux is the essentially artistic activity, Nietzsche can say that 'it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that the world is justified'.[5] In Stirner's philosophy, the process of formulating knowledge completes itself when the concrete material data of experience have been 'annihilated' and 'incorporated' into the hungry vacuity of the rapacious self, whose knowledge of the world is therefore simultaneously an act of 'consumption' and appropriation, colonizing the external world of known objects and transforming it into the comprehended property of the knowing subject. My world is formed around my imperialistic projects, which bring organization and unity into my originally diffuse experience. For Stirner: 'Each one is the centre of his world. "The world" is indeed only that which he himself is not, but which belongs to him, stands in relation to him, exists for him. Around you everything revolves.'[6] Both for Stirner and for Nietzsche, then, the act of cognition is simultaneously an act of metaphysical creation which directly reflects the characteristic aspirations of the knowing subject. For both philosophers, it is the

[1] H. J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers*, ch. II, sec. I.
[2] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 211.
[3] Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, § 10.
[4] See, e.g., *The Will to Power*, § 590.
[5] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 5.
[6] *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, pp. 354–5.

act of a subject who thereby brings into being, by his own fiat and out of the dumb chaos of his primordial experience, that articulate and consciously meaningful unity which for the first time presents itself as a purposive and coherent 'world'.

What *kind* of a 'world' emerges as a result of these acts of metaphysical creation? For Nietzsche, of course, (although this is as much a condition as it is a result of his world-creating act) the world in which he henceforth resolves to live is one in which 'God is dead'[1]: were God still alive, it would be necessary to kill him. In Nietzsche's world there is no place for religion, since religion—and in particular the Christian religion, as preached by the Christian Church—is the denial and betrayal of life and of all higher values. To be a Superman it is necessary to be an Anti-christ. Now, to be a Unique One it is also necessary to be an anti-Christ. The world of The Unique One is a world from which every incarnation of God, of 'the divine', has been evicted, but since ' "Man" is as imaginary as Christ'[2] it is also a world which has been purged of that last remnant of religious reverence, the reverence for humanity and the respect for human dignity. The Unique One, whose atheism stops at nothing, of course feels respect for nothing. The only reality which he recognizes is power, for he lives in a world in which 'at every moment everyone uses as much power as he possesses.'[3] 'The world belongs to *me*,'[4] says Stirner, for whom 'property' is identical with power: 'I myself *am* my power and through it I am my property.'[5] The world of The Unique One, like the world of Nietzsche, is defined by the power which is extant within it and which, in the one case as in the other, finds its supreme manifestation in the ruthless virtuosity of assertive individuals. According to Stirner, life is 'the war of all against all'.[6] According to Nietzsche, 'life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of its own forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it the most mildly, exploitation . . . life *is* precisely the will to power'.[7]

[1] *The Joyful Wisdom*, § 125. [2] D.E., p. 427. [3] D.E., p. 382. [4] D.E., p. 292.
[5] D.E., p. 217. [6] D.E., p. 301. [7] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 259.

It is within such a world, then, that Stirner's Unique One chooses to beat his oblique and lonely path, looking neither to the right nor to the left but picking his own way through the jungle of human existence. And it is within such a world, for Nietzsche, that 'he shall be the greatest who can be the most solitary, the most concealed, the most divergent'.[1] Like the Nietzschean man, who is 'a miracle that occurs only once',[2] the proprietor of Stirner's universe is utterly unique, beyond all comparison, and strictly 'miraculous' in that he is without origin or cause: The Unique One is self-originating and self-caused. If Nietzsche admires 'the hardness of the creator who creates himself',[3] the teaching of Stirner—that 'you are no mere creature, for you are at the same time your own creator'[4]—should ring vibrantly in his ears. The Nietzschean individual, when he listens to the voice of his inner conscience, repeats and acts upon the principle that 'you shall become who you are';[5] while to Stirner's egoist, 'self-possession calls you back to yourself, saying: "Come to yourself!" '[6] Fearlessly disposing of himself, the Nietzschean individual 'lives *imprudently* . . . risks himself constantly',[7] and is able to spurn the petty security of the timid bourgeois because 'it is precisely by his protean arts that he is best protected and concealed';[8] while Stirner's egoist, 'that all-destroying . . . self-dissolving ego, that never-being . . . finite . . . transitory ego',[9] recognizing that 'if anything becomes fixed and indissoluble in me . . . it turns me into a captive and a slave',[10] declares himself to be the perpetual enemy of stability because, like Count Fosco, he is 'sustained by his sublime indifference, self-balanced by his impenetrable calm'. Finally, the Nietzschean individual, possessing that 'power of the spirit to appropriate foreign elements' which 'reveals itself in a strong tendency to assimilate the new to the old', expresses his will to power most characteristically in 'his appropriating power or, to speak figuratively, his "digestive" power' (and Nietzsche adds that 'in fact "the spirit" resembles a stomach more than any-

[1] Op. cit., § 212. [2] Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, § 1.
[3] W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, ch. 4.
[4] D.E., p. 48. [5] *The Joyful Wisdom*, § 270. [6] D.E., p. 193.
[7] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 205. [8] Op. cit., § 230. [9] D.E., p. 213.
[10] D.E., p. 168.

thing else');[1] while Stirner's omnivorous egoist, whose appetite frustration only serves to whet, is in turn moved to declare: 'When the world crosses me . . . I consume it, thereby to appease the hunger of my egoism. To me you represent nothing but—my food'.[2]

It might seem, then, as if—by some occult logic of history—an invisible line stretched directly from Stirner to Nietzsche, connecting the nihilism with which one epoch closed to the nihilism with which the next epoch opened, connecting the nihilism which had announced the collapse of the Hegelian ideal of universal Reason to the nihilism which foreshadowed the brutality and irrationalism of the twentieth century. The cult of the masterful individual, the pre-eminence given to action and will over feeling and intellect, the magnification of power as the first and final cause of all human reality: in such respects as these it might seem as if, by some uncanny dialectic, the manifesto of an ineffectual and forgotten Stirner had been recovered and vindicated in the world-view of his famous successor. Above all, perhaps, it might seem as if Stirner's radical atheism, which in his remorseless hands had been developed into an atheism of knowledge and of values with joyful acceptance of the consequence that if there is no Creator we ourselves must be the creators of our own truths and our own values, was at last restored, by the historic influence of Nietzsche, to its valid place as a traumatic and crucial stage in the emergence of the modern European consciousness.

However, the profound kinship between the two thinkers should not blind us to the equally profound disparities between them. They may give closely parallel accounts of the human predicament and of the terms on which a significant response is possible for us; but when they come to choose their own characteristic forms of individual response, it rapidly becomes clear that they have chosen to depart in different directions and towards different destinations. Both philosophers are agreed that if there is no Author of the universe then there is nothing in the universe which is 'authorized': all solutions are of equal worth, or equally worthless, and we are free to invent the myths which we shall

[1] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 230. [2] D.E., p. 347.

adopt as our truths and to nominate the values which we shall adopt as our ends. But Nietzsche's myths are not Stirner's myths, and the values of the Superman are not the values of The Unique One.

Both Nietzsche and Stirner insist, for example, on the 'uniqueness' of the individual, who is 'incomparable', 'a miracle', because he is a moral universe in and for himself. Whereas, however, for Stirner the 'uniqueness' of the individual signifies his impenetrability, his promiscuous, self-consuming elusion of every category which would place him in some group and so encompass and constrain him; for Nietzsche, the individual's 'uniqueness' primarily denotes his moral and artistic originality, his preservation of his own integrity against the vulgar prejudices of bourgeois convention: whereas the 'uniqueness' of Stirner's individual separates him from the rest of humanity, therefore, the 'uniqueness' of Nietzsche's individual is primarily intended to distinguish him only from the contemporary pharisees and philistines whose values he repudiates. Stirner's Unique One recognizes no imperatives, not even the imperative to make of oneself what one can, since 'what one can become, one does become';[1] for Nietzsche, on the contrary, 'the man who does not want to belong to the mass... should follow his conscience, which shouts to him: "Be yourself! You are not really everything which you do, think, and desire at present"... for your true self does not lie deeply concealed within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above what you usually take for yourself.'[2] It is no accident that the very aspect of Christian practice which excited Stirner's liveliest detestation—its emphasis on self-mortification—was the aspect which Nietzsche chiefly admired, for Nietzsche's ideal was that of a man who had attained to individual perfection by a process of 'self-overcoming' which combined the insight of a philosopher and the fastidiousness of an artist with the iron self-control of a saint. Whereas Stirner's Unique One is in constant revolt, perpetually transforming himself and spending himself, 'living himself out', Nietzsche preaches the necessity for his Superman of a rigorous and almost

[1] D.E., p. 380

[2] *Schopenhauer as Educator*, § 1

monastic self-discipline. Nietzsche's ideal is in the future, and can be attained only by long and austere vigilance on the part of individuals who are capable of 'sublimating' their meaner impulses and transmuting them into creative instruments of their steadfast will; Stirner's Unique One lives in and for the present, conscious of his own mortality and therefore resolved to enjoy himself in the world regardless of consequences which may transpire beyond the horizon of his own finite existence. In short, Nietzsche, desperate to fill the moral vacuum created by 'the death of God', is first and foremost concerned to propound a new object for the moral endeavours of the human race; while Stirner, declaring that 'a man is "called" to nothing and he has no "station" or "duty", any more than a plant or an animal has a "vocation" ',[1] has not the slightest interest in any object which transcends his own actual and specific desires, since 'my cause . . . is not anything general, for it is—*unique*, as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself!'[2]

Thus, although Stirner, like Nietzsche, intends to accomplish a 'transvaluation of all values', unlike Nietzsche he has no intention of replacing Christian and humanist values by a new set of *moral* values. Unlike Nietzsche, he is not interested in discovering the 'moral art' by which health could be restored to a sick civilization. Let Nietzsche regenerate a decadent culture if he will. For The Unique One, 'health' and 'disease' are nothing but new names for the old, weary Virtue and Vice, and the new moral medicine, like the old moral theology, is nothing but the latest attempt to induce me to sacrifice my life to an alien ideal and to prevent me from squandering it as I please. Reason, culture, joy, strength, courage, cruelty—these are the elements of Nietzsche's 'master-morality', which 'despises the cowardly, the timid, the insignificant, and those thinking merely of narrow utility, as well as the distrustful, with their constrained glances, the self-abasing, the dog-like kind of men who let themselves be abased, the mendicant flatterers, and above all the liars'.[3] Nietzsche's cruel saint will be one of 'the masters', and 'it is the peculiar right of masters to create values'.[4] Egoistic he may be; immoral, or 'beyond good and evil' he may

[1] D.E., p. 382.
[2] D.E., p. 14.
[3] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 260.
[4] Op. cit., § 261.

be; but as a 'noble soul' he will possess that 'instinct for reverence' which will make him 'acknowledge . . . . that there are other equally privileged ones': 'he honours himself in them . . . and moves among those equals with the same . . . modesty and delicate respect which he enjoys in intercourse with himself.[1]' Now, clearly Stirner cannot accept that the 'right' to create new values should be 'peculiar' to the members of a 'ruling class',[2] any more than he can accept that the exercise of this right should be shared among all the members of the master-caste; the creation of new values is for Stirner the peculiar right of The Unique One, whatever his personal qualities, and he *uniquely* exercises this 'right'. Nor can he accept the principle of the 'master-morality' that 'one has duties only towards one's equals',[3] since for Stirner The Unique One recognizes no duties, either towards himself or to others, and *as* The Unique One not even the greatest of mankind is his 'equal'. Above all Stirner cannot accept, with Nietzsche, that 'Nature distinguishes the pre-eminently spiritual ones . . . as the élite'[4]—not only because for The Unique One there is nothing pre-eminent about 'spiritual' qualities, but also, and principally, because the idea of an 'élite', of a purified caste whose members share a generic character, status, and mission (however diverse they may be in their personal traits and individual gifts), is an idea which is utterly repugnant to that exclusive, self-absorbed, and totally self-sufficient being who is The Unique One. The Unique One asserts himself, not as a spiritual aristocrat, but as a calculating autocrat. He perceives (as Nietzsche explicitly avows) that the ultimate object of every aristocratic society is 'the elevation of the type "Man" ':[5] ultimately, the attempt to create the Superman is no more than yet another attempt to transfigure Man into an image and vessel of the divine, to summon the finite individual to become something infinitely higher than himself. To Nietzsche, therefore, The Unique One might retort: 'I have no *vocation* and follow none, not even that of becoming a Superman'.[6] 'By the side of Man', says Stirner, 'there always stands the Un-

[1] Op. cit., § 263 and § 265. [2] Op. cit., § 260. [3] Loc. cit.
[4] *The Antichrist*, § 57. [5] *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 257. [6] See D.E., p. 169.

man, the solitary one, the egoist . . . this invincible Devil',[1] whose terrorism is more dangerous than the terrorism of the Superman, because it is an actual, everpresent, and ubiquitous terrorism. Beside the Man of Feuerbach and the Superman of Nietzsche, then, and the deadly enemy of both, stands the Unman of Stirner. To those two great religious images, modern incarnations of the age-old conspiracy to suborn and expropriate the self-centred individual by enticing him to acknowledge an absolute ideal above and beyond himself, he opposes his own complete self-possession. 'Inhuman' because he is irreligious, the self-conscious and total egoist must refuse to be a Superman for exactly the same reasons which justify his refusal to be merely a 'man'.

Within the compass of Nietzsche's voluminous and labyrinthine writings there are admittedly numerous inconsistencies: at many points, apparently for the sake of a striking aphorism, he flagrantly contradicts what he has written in passages elsewhere, while the sibylline quality of many of his utterances frequently baffles every attempt to discover a clear and unequivocal interpretation. Nevertheless, when due allowance is made for the licence of a poet and the ambiguity of a seer, there is no doubt that Nietzsche presents us with a philosophy of life which, in its total import, is completely distinctive and wholly unmistakable. And there is no doubt that, although his philosophy of life is one which, in certain of its fundamental insights, would have stimulated the admiring curiosity of Max Stirner, it is one which in the end he would have curtly and implacably disowned. He would have found little to criticize in Nietzsche's subjective conception of truth, or in his instrumentalist theory of knowledge, which in so many respects resembles his own. He would almost certainly have assented to Nietzsche's description of the philosophical act as the artistic creation of a significant order out of what is originally a crass and senseless immanence. He would certainly have recognized in Nietzsche's conception of life as a perpetual struggle for power, in which weakness is to be mercilessly exploited, a historic recovery and an imaginative enrichment of his own philosophy of ruthless

[1] D.E., p. 165.

self-assertion and self-aggrandizement. But he would have utterly rejected the proposition that the creation of new values should be the common prerogative of a master-caste, since for Stirner it is The Unique One, and The Unique One alone, who from his 'creative nothingness', and with arbitrary indifference, nominates those hitherto anonymous objects to which he provisionally assigns a factitious and purely contingent value. He would have utterly rejected that exalted 'morality, or mental and physical discipline', which produces 'greatness of soul' in Nietzsche's Superman,[1] since for Stirner it is self-possession, and self-possession alone, which is the mark of the conscious egoist, and the meanest, shabbiest, most servile man may still live as a conscious egoist, providing only that in his meanness and servility he means to serve no one but himself and resolves to hold fast to nothing but himself. Finally, and in general, he would have utterly rejected Nietzsche's supreme project, which runs through and inspires all his writings, the project of redirecting and elevating the moral aspirations of humanity by depicting an ideal of personal perfection which will serve as an archetype for human endeavour, since for Stirner the quest for perfection is merely the name given by secular moralists to the quest for God, and as an essentially *religious* quest it begins and ends with the alienation of the individual from himself and from his worldly estate.

Thus the philosophy of life which culminates in the vision of the Superman is in the end essentially irreconcilable with the philosophy which founds itself upon the self-possession of the reticent Unique One. Despite their ultimate and essential divergence, however, it remains true that between these two thinkers, Stirner and Nietzsche, there is a profound and almost esoteric affinity which justifies the historian in appraising the world-outlook of either of them through the lens formed by the philosophy of the other. In their origins, it may not be too sweeping to say, the philosophies of both men reflect a basic disturbance at the heart of the modern European consciousness, a disturbance which they were among the first to diagnose and record, and a disturbance so grave that, in an age of uncertainty, the fabric of Western

[1] *The Will to Power*, § 981.

civilization has been shaken by it to its foundations. Nietzsche foresaw that the death of God would be followed by a collapse of norms, and that if the pattern of futility were allowed to complete itself the result would be a general moral and intellectual shipwreck, of which economic crisis and political disaster would be only the overt and public consequences. Forty years earlier, Stirner, standing at the edge of the same abyss, had stared even more directly and more brazenly into the void, and had reported, with unruffled detachment, the meaninglessness and desolation in its depths. Like Nietzsche, Stirner was from the outset resolved to confront the challenge of nihilism, to face its implications without evasion or pretence, and to compose the terms of his response to the world over which it had cast its sinister shadow. The significance of Stirner's philosophy, like the significance of Nietzsche's, lies in the encounter with nothingness by which it was generated and to which it offers a solution. It is in the solutions which they propose that the two philosophers differ so catastrophically. Cast into a world drained of all value by a general upsurge of meaninglessness, Nietzsche proposed to create a new and higher ideal of moral culture by which an authentic dignity would be vouchsafed for a self-chosen few. Stirner, by contrast, far from lamenting the collapse of the old values and hearing this as a summons to replace them by a higher ideal and a transfigured morality, was instead to be found crouched, attentively listening to the avalanche and hearing it as a liberation which was on no account to be followed by a new servitude. In the time of the destruction of the world he would be the one fixed point, and he would thenceforward make his way without regard to moralities, old or new. The abandonment of men to their own fate was not for Stirner a predicament to be surmounted, but an opportunity to be exploited. Unlike Nietzsche, he did not recoil from the nullity of the void. On the contrary, when the time came, he resolved to take up his abode at its very heart and centre.

CHAPTER VIII

STIRNER AND EXISTENTIALISM

THE original thinker often has to await the passage of many years before his originality is fully understood. Schopenhauer was in his embittered old age, Nietzsche's intellect had clouded into final darkness, before younger men arose to acknowledge the achievement which their own contemporaries had failed to discern. It sometimes happens also that a thinker, whose true originality was obscured by the misleading notoriety which flooded him during his lifetime, may suffer a lapse of several generations before his thought receives a new fame and a fresh meaning from men whose sympathies and preoccupations equip them to recognize and reinterpret it. The classic example of this phenomenon is Kierkegaard, embroiled in the controversies of his country and his day, his insights wasted or misunderstood, but rediscovered by the twentieth century to preside over the changed directions of Christian thought and illuminate them by his perceptions.

What seems to be required is the attainment of a new perspective, from which the solitary figure, previously thought to have been pursuing an eccentric course leading nowhere, can be seen to have marked out one of the few significant causeways along which future thinkers can travel with facility and advantage. In the case of Kierkegaard, the rise of 'existential Christianity' created the new perspective, for it was within existentialist modes of thought that the Danish thinker's genius was brought at last to fruition. Now, in the case of Max Stirner, can it be said that the rise of 'atheistic existentialism', the expression of radical atheism within existentialist modes of thought, has intimated a similar revaluation and a similar recovery of meaning?

Certainly, in recent years numerous historians have made passing reference to what Copleston calls Stirner's 'spiritual affinity with

existentialism'.[1] For Joll, Stirner's radical individualism 'is a doctrine that comes very near to some forms of later existentialism',[2] while for Woodcock it is 'in his denial of all natural laws and of a common humanity' that Stirner 'draws near to nihilism and existentialism'.[3] According to Copleston, 'it can hardly be said that emphasis on the theme of property is a characteristic of existentialism, but the theme of the unique free individual certainly is'; and this historian adds that 'Stirner's obscure remarks about "creative nothing" recall to mind certain aspects of Heidegger's thought'.[4] In a discussion of Sartre's *The Flies*, Helmut Thielicke concludes that its existentialist hero, Orestes, can only live in 'a country where he is completely alone', and that such a country 'is doubtless the country envisioned by Max Stirner, the country of "the ego and his own" '.[5] Indeed, although Sartre 'sees, at least from a distance, the vulpine powers that inevitably make his atheistic world unsafe', Thielicke declares that 'Max Stirner saw them more clearly'.[6]

It is perhaps not so very surprising that scholars should incidentally have perceived some vague affinities between Stirner's philosophy and that of atheistic existentialists like Sartre. In fact, however, the existentialist thinker whom scholars have most notably and explicitly compared with Stirner is not Sartre, but the devout Kierkegaard—a choice of comparison which significantly illustrates what will be one of the principal contentions of the present chapter, for it will be here contended that Stirner's affinities to existentialism are methodological, conceptual, or structural, and by no means denote a similarity of response or a common concern. The structural relationships between Stirner and even so ardently Christian an existentialist as Kierkegaard are nevertheless sufficiently remarkable to cause a historian like Alwin Diemer to state that 'in the religious sphere Sören Kierkegaard's concept of the "subjective thinker" corresponds to the radical egoism advocated by Max Stirner'.[7] And according to

[1] F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. VII ('Fichte to Nietzsche'), ch. XV, sec. 4.
[2] Joll, *The Anarchists*, p. 172.
[3] Woodcock, *Anarchism*, ch. 4.
[4] Copleston, loc. cit.
[5] H. Thielicke, *Nihilism*, ch. XII, sec. 1.
[6] Thielicke, loc. cit.
[7] A. Diemer, *Grundriss der Philosophie*, vol. I, Part 2, ch. 2, sec. B, II, [1], 1.

Karl Löwith, Stirner's concept of 'The Unique One' and Kierkegaard's concept of 'the solitary individual' both 'illustrate the same question, asked in religious and profane terms. The problem of their common radicalism is the nihilism which arises from extreme isolation. For Stirner, it is the careless nihilism of "I have made Nothing my cause"—namely, nothing other than myself. For Kierkegaard, it is the melancholy nihilism of irony and boredom, anxiety and despair. Kierkegaard's analyses of these phenomena have all the same functions: . . . by confronting him with nothingness, to force him to make a decision: "either" to despair. . . . "or" to dare to make the leap of faith. In this *salto mortale*, man comes to stand, not before nothingness, but before God, who created being out of nothingness. Stirner, on the other hand, declares himself to be the nothingness which is itself creative.'[1] Both Stirner and the existentialist, it may be argued, whatever the difference between their ultimate response, are confronted by a common situation, in the face of which they must compose the terms of their personal resolves. Some existentialists, like Sartre, adopt a kind of desperate humanism, courageously defying the absurdity to which all human endeavour is doomed; others, like Kierkegaard, embrace Christianity in the hope of attaining a new being in God; the nihilistic egoist, like Stirner, is the man who resolutely chooses to live for himself alone in the face of the nothingness by which he knows his situation to be defined.

The original discovery of Stirner's metaphysical kinship to his contemporary, Kierkegaard, was the work of Martin Buber. In 'The Question to The Single One', Buber describes Stirner's concept of 'The Unique One' as a 'border concept' like Kierkegaard's 'Single One'. 'This border product of a German Protagoras is usually underrated: the loss of reality which responsibility and truth have suffered in our time has here, if not its spiritual origin, certainly its exact conceptual prediction . . . Kierkegaard's Single One has this in common with its counterpoint, Stirner's Unique One, that both are border categories; it has no more in common than this, but also it has no less.' He goes on: 'The contrapuntal position of Stirner's Unique One to Kierkegaard's Single One

[1] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, Part Two, ch. V, sec. 8.

becomes clearest when the questions of responsibility and truth are raised. . . . What Stirner with his destructive power successfully attacks is the substitute for a reality that is no longer believed—fictitious responsibility. . . . He wishes to show the nothingness of the word which has decayed into a phrase.'[1] According to Buber, Stirner has destroyed only 'the routine forms' of responsibility and truth, 'and thus, contrary to his whole intention,has prepared for their purification and renewal'. Stirner has rightly dissolved the false conventional ideas of responsibility, and has thus enabled Kierkegaard's Single One, 'rushing in a parabola past Stirner', to 'proclaim anew the responsibility which is in faith'.[2] Buber continues: 'As with responsibility, so with truth itself: here the parabolic meeting becomes still uncannier. . . . Stirner has dissolved the truth which is only noetic, and against all his knowledge and desire cleared a space into which Kierkegaard's believed and tested truth has stepped, the truth which can no longer be obtained and possessed by the *noesis* alone, but which must be existentially realized in order to be inwardly known and communicated.'

'But there is still a third and last contact and repulsion',Buber claims. 'Stirner leads out of all kinds of alleys into the open country where each is The Unique One and the world is his property. There they bustle in futile and non-committal life, and nothing comes of it but bustle, till one after the other begins to notice what this country is called. Kierkegaard leads to a "narrow pass"; his task is "where possible to induce the many, to invite them, to stir them to press through this narrow pass . . ." I think, however,' says Buber, 'that in actual history the way to this narrow pass is through that open country that first is called individual egoism and then collective egoism and, finally, by its true name, despair.'[3]

At the end of his book entitled *Aux sources de l'existentialisme: Max Stirner* (in which, despite its title, the author devotes only the two concluding pages to the discussion of Stirner as a precursor of existentialism), Henri Arvon also raises the question of Stirner's

[1] M. Buber, 'The Question to The Single One', included in the collection of essays entitled *Between Man and Man*. [2] Loc. cit. [3] Loc. cit.

relationship to Kierkegaard. It is no accident, Arvon declares, that the rediscovery of Stirner coincided historically with the revival of interest in Kierkegaard. 'The two philosophers indeed, were ignorant of each other; the atheist Stirner and Kierkegaard the believer are apparently separated by an impassable gulf. And yet what an astonishing encounter this is. It is with the same dialectical vigour that they combat the system of Hegel; it is with the same violence that they censure impersonal Reason. Both writers found the existential Ego by infinitely extending its field of action. Stirner recalls The Unique One to the consciousness of his self-possession, Kierkegaard writes in the *Postscript* that "a man must never forget that he exists." Stirner exalts the absolute character of uniqueness, Kierkegaard glorifies "absolute existence". Sometimes even their modes of reasoning are similar almost to the point of identity. In *Either-Or* Kierkegaard expresses the desire that "the choose-thyself may replace the Know-thyself". Stirner expresses the same idea in almost analogous terms when he writes: "Over the portal of our time stands, not the 'Know-thyself' of Apollo, but 'Get the value out of thyself!' "[1] To choose oneself, says Arvon, or to get the value out of oneself is equally 'to appeal to the fecund virtuosity of the Ego, to allow the individual to unfold his originality in accordance with the laws of his own nature'. But Arvon does not accept the claim, put forward by Buber, that by purging and reconstituting the concepts of responsibility and truth Stirner in effect clears the way for Kierkegaard's truth and responsibility 'before God'. 'It would be possible to maintain the exact opposite: Kierkegaard abandons the consciousness which, in anguish, discovers the void, while Stirner transcends the "Nothingness" by transforming it into a "creative Nothingness". It is he who enables the Kierkegaardian man full of "fear and trembling" to attain to "egoistic self-enjoyment".'[2] For Arvon, 'Stirner and Kierkegaard have accomplished the same work of liberation: they have restored the pre-eminent value of the Ego to its true primacy', but whereas Kierkegaard prepares the way for a new submission Stirner is resolved to remain his own and to rejoice in the consciousness of his self-possession.

[1] Arvon, *Aux sources de l'existentialisme*, p. 177. [2] Op. cit., p. 178.

A writer like Löwith seems to recognize in Stirner Kierkegaard's spiritual *doppelgänger* or perhaps a kind of diabolical mirror-image which cunningly perverts all the characteristic features of the original. For Arvon, too, Kierkegaard and Stirner are inverted reflections of each other, the anxious shadows in the one figure serving as the bold outlines for the profile of the other. Without doubt the two thinkers are global opposites. Yet it is essentially the same world which both men inhabit and which they reflect, in such contrasted fashion, from their contrasted perspectives. Their relationship is fundamentally ambivalent in a way which can only be fully understood if both thinkers are considered as polar terms of a common axis, centring on the same focus and pursuing their antipodean courses on the periphery of the same universe. This is a universe from which all traditional landmarks have been effaced, across which there are no longer any safe and certain routes, a deserted universe through which the solitary traveller has to find his own way, unaided, in the flickering or steady light cast by his own personal resolve. It is the estranged universe most vividly portrayed in the writings of modern existentialists. From the perspective of a Kierkegaard, it may be hopefully illuminated by the light of faith. From the atheistic perspective of a Sartre, for whom the light of faith is no more than a will o' the wisp, it reflects only the abandoned and desperate plight of the men who are cast adrift in it. It is the universe of Stirner, and as one of its earliest explorers he may surely claim attention for the vision of it to be gained from his own original perspective. Arvon is surely right when he declares: 'Stirner, as we know, represents the last link in the Hegelian chain; but he is at the same time the first link in another chain which, after remaining invisible for nearly a century, has recently reappeared in the broad light of day.'[1] And the same writer is surely justified in putting this question: 'If Christian existentialism recognizes itself in Kierkegaard, can atheistic existentialism continue to ignore Stirner?'[2]

To all intents and purposes, however, atheistic existentialism *has* ignored Stirner. It might have been supposed, for example,

[1] Op. cit., p. 177. [2] Op. cit., p. 178.

that in his critique of the 'collective man' who is ruled by the blind conventions and anonymous institutions of his society, or in his account of 'authenticity' as the posture of the individual who resolutely refuses to become identified with any of his fleeting and ultimately worthless undertakings, Heidegger would have found in Stirner's Unique One an uncannily vivid anticipation both of his protest and of his remedy. It might have been thought that Sartre, in his concept of the individual as an indefinable and creative transcendence or in his account of isolation and conflict as the inescapable condition of all men, would almost inevitably have turned to *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* as a unique manifesto from which to draw abundant confirmation and illustration. As a philosophically educated German of his generation Heidegger is virtually certain to have made early acquaintance with Stirner's work, although he nowhere refers to it in his voluminous writings. Sartre seems to be dimly aware of Stirner as a symbolic figure marking an obscure outpost on the distant margins of the existentialist universe, for when he comes to describe de Sade's experience of the 'untrammelled superiority of the Ego', his 'narrow and profound experience of non-communication', he describes this as de Sade's 'experience of what Stirner will later call The Unique One';[1] in his classic descriptions of subjectivity, 'bad faith', and being-with-others, however, at those central points of Sartre's phenomenology which the experience of The Unique One might have significantly enriched, Stirner's relevance is inexplicably disregarded or forgotten. As far as the two major representatives of atheistic existentialism are ostensibly concerned, Stirner might never have existed.

Indeed, among the notable representatives of atheistic existentialism Albert Camus, who of course was not primarily a philosopher, is the only one to have perceived in *Der Einzige* a unique and crucial stage in man's exploration of himself and in his encounter with his situation.[2] For Camus, man's dilemma is

[1] J.-P. Sartre, 'Question de méthode', prefatory essay in *Critique de la raison dialectique*, translated by H. Barnes as *The Problem of Method*, London, 1963, p. 114.

[2] In *L'Homme révolté*. Almost the only major passage omitted from the English translation of this work is the section devoted to Stirner—thus furnishing yet an-

that he is 'the only creature who refuses to be what he is'.[1] In his quest for an identity which transcends his conditions, he converts his life into an act of 'rebellion'. 'What is a rebel?', asks Camus. 'A man who says No.'[2] His refusal is not a renunciation, but it is a repudiation of all authority which seeks to confine him within the straitjacket of external standards. His refusal must be an absolute, for 'one cannot be a nihilist by halves.'[3] And since his refusal must be a positive act, the rebel 'is also a man who says Yes'.[4] What Camus distinctively calls 'the metaphysical rebellion' is 'the movement by which a man confronts not only his condition but the whole of Creation',[5] and paramount among the metaphysical rebels of modern times are Stirner and Nietzsche. For Camus, Stirner is one of 'the great adventurers into the Absurd'. Like Nietzsche, he does not shrink from carrying his atheism into the sphere of ethics, discerning in morality 'the last face of the God who requires to be destroyed', but 'unlike Nietzsche, his nihilism is a satisfied nihilism: Stirner laughs in the impasse, while Nietzsche rushes against the walls'.[6] In The Unique One, Camus acknowledges, nihilism is carried to its logical conclusion. 'There is no act of destruction from which Stirner will recoil':[7] for the nihilistic egoist, nothing is to be prized or admired, nothing is to be believed or endured, apart from the unique individual himself, who is himself a nothingness. In and around himself The Unique One creates a desert, a desert in which the only utterance is the triumphant cry of its sole inhabitant, and it is 'thus, on the ruins of the world, that the final victory of the spirit of rebellion is celebrated by the desolate laughter of its egoistic monarch'.[8] Having disowned God, having destroyed morality, having shattered the image of Humanity as the last refuge of the divine, nothing

other significant commentary on the failure of British critics to appreciate Stirner's true place in the recent history of European philosophy. See chapter V, p. 104 (and footnote 2), of the present work.

[1] A. Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, Introduction.
[2] Camus, op. cit., ch. I.
[3] Op. cit., Introduction.
[4] Op. cit., ch. I.
[5] Op. cit., ch. II, introduction.
[6] Op. cit., ch. II, sec. entitled 'L'Affirmation absolue'. The first part of this section has the sub-title, 'L'Unique', and the remainder is sub-titled 'Nietzsche et le nihilisme'.
[7] Loc. cit.
[8] Loc. cit.

remains to the nihilist except the affirmation of a self which has itself already been reduced to ashes.

Camus, of course, is here engaged in advancing a special thesis, the thesis that man's return to himself is symbolized and anticipated by the destructive and creative acts of individuals who are in open rebellion against their conditions. This does not mean, however, that Stirner's existential role is necessarily restricted to that of a hypothetical spokesman for one phase of a specific and limited thesis, for Camus' thesis itself amounts to an original, but highly pertinent, transcription of several distinctive concepts which are common to many existentialist thinkers, both atheistic and Christian. The free self-assertion of the solitary individual who preserves his finite integrity by refusing the world's schematized values with a vehemence and absoluteness which reduces them to meaninglessness—this theme embodies several of the concepts which elsewhere find ready employment in the hands of Kierkegaard and Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre; Stirner, the absolute rebel, distinguishes himself by his inflexible resolution to abide wholly within the impoverished but free domain described by these concepts, without succumbing to the perennial temptation to seek solace or relief outside or beyond them. Each of the leading existentialists, perhaps dismayed by the appalling conditions of the enterprise on which they have embarked, has in the end turned to a source of significance beyond and outside the subjective circle which they have described: they have sought, by clutching at some metaphysical or moral transcendent, to provide a meaningful foundation for their personal world, lest it be consumed by its own insecurity. The Kierkegaards leap into the awaiting arms of their God, while the atheistic existentialists, the Sartres, seek in communism, or in some other moral or social absolute, to discover a private exit from the bleak amphitheatre in which their original monologue was to have been recited. Even Heidegger, who in any case has always rejected the appellation of 'existentialist', seems at last to seek shelter in a kind of mysticism of Being. What is truly astonishing is that the leading representatives of atheistic existentialism should have failed to see—or, if they have seen, to acknowledge—in Stirner's Unique One the

one finished, historic instance of that total encounter with nothingness from which they have themselves in the end recoiled.

Without doubt Stirner occupies a unique point of vantage within the universe of existentialism. His Unique One is the polar point from which all the longitudinal lines of the existentialist world start or in which they terminate. From this vantage-point, more clearly than from any other, it is possible to take the most accurate bearings, to appraise the dimensions of this universe, and to plot its main features. It is no matter for surprise, therefore, that the principal landmarks noted by existentialists in their anxious passage through this world should also have been observed by Stirner, although with more complacent detachment, from his remote and elevated fastness. To execute a detailed comparison between Stirner's world-view and the world-views of the leading representatives of modern existentialism would be too formidable an undertaking within the compass of a work such as the present one, and in any case perhaps the best way of assessing Stirner's complex relationship to existentialism would be by conducting a critical examination of his philosophy from within the general existentialist perspective—a project which will be initiated in Part Three. There are, of course, profound divergences, both in analysis and response, among the various philosophers who take up an existentialist standpoint, even among those who, describing themselves as atheistic existentialists, approach most nearly to Stirner's position. At this stage perhaps it will be sufficient to indicate the chief respects in which Stirner's world-view anticipates and reflects the world-view associated, in the broadest sense, with atheistic existentialism.[1]

The world of the atheistic existentialist is, in Helmut Kuhn's words, 'a world without signs' and therefore 'something less than a world—a mere congeries of obtrusive existents'; it is an unstable collocation of brute facts, inexplicable, purposeless, absurd; it is 'the obliteration of world in the sense of a meaningful and

[1] Thus Heidegger is here treated as an atheistic existentialist (although he objects to being styled either 'atheist' or 'existentialist'), for undoubtedly *Being and Time* has in fact been generally received as a classic document of atheistic existentialism.

familiar totality'.[1] Unlike the Platonic world with its immutable and eternal essences, unlike the Christian world with its providential scheme or the Marxist world with its assured historic directions, the world of the atheistic existentialist is a dumb and massive plenitude without form or direction. Cast into such a world, pitilessly adrift there, man looks in vain for the signs of a path across the desert. There are no destinations other than those which he sets for himself in his total abandonment, no signposts other than those which he will erect by his audacity, no routes other than those which he will carve in his despair. Condemned to confront himself as the unique source of meaning in a world in which he is a stranger, man is doomed to become the author of whatever being he may possess, and this archetypal creation of meaning, for himself and the world, is the lonely and awful responsibility from which no individual can escape. The world of the atheistic existentialist, in short, is a world in which the individual has no role except to invent for himself a role.

Now, is this or is this not, in many of its principal features, the world of Stirner, the world inhabited by The Unique One? 'From the moment he first sees the light of day', says Stirner at the beginning of *Der Einzige*, 'a man seeks to find and win himself from out of the motley confusion in which he is jumbled about with everything else.'[2] The world of The Unique One is not, we are told, like the ordered and meaningful world of Hegel, in which order and meaning are assured by the government of absolute concepts and in which I may appeal to 'the nature of the case' or 'the idea of the situation' for objective guidance of my conduct. 'As if a concept of the situation could exist in its own right', exclaims Stirner, 'instead of being the concept which one makes oneself of the situation!'[3] When Hegel preaches the reign of universal essences, he is preaching the classic dogma of every religion, for 'to recognize and acknowledge only essences and nothing but essences—that is religion'.[4] Although God has been destroyed in more than one of his forms, the work of deicide will not be complete until the task begun by the Sceptics, when they

[1] H. Kuhn, *Encounter With Nothingness*, ch. III.
[2] D.E., p. 17. [3] D.E., p. 115. [4] D.E., p. 52.

dissolved 'the world' as a set of given and necessary meanings, has been finally accomplished. *My* world, declares Stirner in his 'Rejoinder' to Feuerbach, obtains its unity and meaning from *my act* of consciously appropriating it and administering it around my arbitrary projects. 'Does Feuerbach live in any world other than *his* world? Does he live in Hess's, in Szeliga's, or in Stirner's world? Is not it Feuerbach's living in it which makes it be that there is the world—that is, the world experienced, looked at, and thought of by Feuerbach, the world surrounding *him*? He does not merely live in its midst, for he is himself its middle, he is the mid-point of *his* world. And, like Feuerbach, no one lives in any other than his own world; like Feuerbach, each one is the centre of his world. "The world" is indeed only that which he himself is not, but which belongs to him, stands in relation to him, exists for him. Around you everything revolves, and you are the centre of the external world as well as centre of the world of thought. Your world reaches as far as your capacity to grasp it, and what you grasp exists through your very grasping of it.'[1]

For the atheistic existentialist—in particular for Heidegger and Sartre—the world becomes for the first time a meaningful totality in the light of my practical concern with the things by which I am surrounded; existential space, for example, is not to be understood as the abstract and objective extension of pure geometry, but rather as the instrumental system of places and directions which organize themselves around my creative purposes as their pragmatic centre; the things which I find 'to hand' are made to transcend their brute anonymity, to emerge from a hitherto featureless landscape and assume a character which points beyond them to the horizon of significance formed by my possibilities as I project and realize them. For Stirner, in like manner, 'all predicates of objects are my *creatures*', which it is always open to me 'to take back into their nothingness, that is, into me, the creator':[2] everyone has a different relationship to objects, which are to each of us 'what he *makes out of* them'.[3] 'How we toss things about', says Stirner, 'is a matter for our *option*, our *freewill*: we use them according to our *heart's pleasure*,

[1] *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, p. 354. [2] D.E., p. 395. [3] D.E., pp. 392–3.

or rather, as best we *can*. . . . What a man is, he makes out of things; "as you look at the world, so it looks back at you" . . . and therefore the things and their appearance are not first, but I am, my will is. . . . I determine what I will seek. . . . I choose for myself what I please, and in choosing I show my--arbitrariness.'[1] For Stirner and the atheistic existentialist alike, it seems, the world first takes on a significance against the horizon of my choices. There are naturally many differences of accent and not a few differences of substantive import: Heidegger, for example, does not focus so much attention on the singularity and arbitrariness of the individual's world-forming choices, while Sartre, as a species of 'realist', is more concerned to preserve the inherent givenness of objective 'qualities' which announce themselves to our consciousness. Between Stirner and the existentialists, however, there explicitly runs this perennial theme--that the guide-lines of the world, in so far as it forms a coherent totality, all run at last into that purposive human reality which is its existential centre.

What is this human reality, we may ask, and what is the nature of its creative, world-forming act? 'The existentialist philosopher', replies John Macquarrie to the first question, 'claims that man must always be understood as a "who" and not as a "what".'[2] And on the last page of *Der Einzige* Stirner also gives his reply: 'The question about concepts, "What is Man?", has been transformed into the question about a person, "Who is the man?"'[3] 'Man as the existentialist sees him is indefinable, because to begin with he is nothing',[4] says Sartre, echoing Stirner's constant reference to The Unique One as 'this nothingness', who is 'unspeakable' because 'this poor devil of language lacks a word' to describe him.[5] The Unique One is strictly indefinable for Stirner, as man is indefinable for the existentialist, precisely because he *is* 'unique'. To say that he is 'unique' is of course not to *describe* him, since ' "You are unique" means no more than "You are you".'[6] ' "The Unique One" is an expression which expresses . . .

[1] D.E., pp. 393-4.
[2] J. Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology*, London, 1955, p. 37.
[3] D.E., p. 429.
[4] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 28.
[5] See D.E., pp. 274 and 215.
[6] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 349.

Nothing.'[1] In any case the individual does not find himself, like some inert thing stamped by a given set of qualities, branded with a given set of predicates which determine his nature. Like the Sartrean man, 'whose existence comes before his essence', who 'exists before he can be defined by any conception',[2] Stirner's Unique One eludes the domination of concepts and general categories: the perpetual enemy of the universal, he remains always 'that particular, contingent subject',[3] that 'finite, self-dissolving ego' who at every instant transcends the self which he leaves behind, as 'a fresh moment of the future beckons': 'you yourself surpass yourself, and become higher than you are',[4] says Stirner, in a passage which vividly recalls Sartre's account of human reality as 'escaping from his being as from his essence' towards a future which he is not yet.[5] For Sartre, as for Stirner, a man 'is always something other than one can *say* of him, for he is at least the one who escapes from this specific classification, the one who is already beyond the name one gives him, the attribute one recognizes in him'.[6] For Stirner, as for Sartre, I am not to be identified with my role, which does not support me but is supported by me, or with any of my qualities, which I temporarily instantiate and perpetually transcend: he who respected me only as a 'Berliner', a 'European', or as a 'human being' would be 'paying me only a very indifferent respect . . . since he would be respecting only one of my *qualities*, not *me*'.[7] Finally, for both Stirner and Sartre, that which frees me to become myself is the *consciousness* by virtue of which the world is present to me as that which I distinguish myself from; the Sartrean consciousness, which is literally identical with the individual's choice of himself as present to the world of his choice, is surely in this respect the phenomenological descendant of the consciousness of The Unique One, who recognizes that 'what I do unconsciously, I half do',[8] while if I consciously look upon myself as beyond and above my conditions this conscious choice is in itself enough to place me above and beyond them.[9]

[1] Op. cit., p. 347. [2] See Sartre, loc. cit. [3] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 404.
[4] D.E., p. 48 [5] See, e.g., *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, ch. 1, sec. I.
[6] Sartre, loc. cit. [7] D.E., p. 204. [8] D.E., p. 420. [9] See D.E., p. 422.

In his account of The Unique One's sovereign creativity, it might further be claimed, Stirner goes on to anticipate the existentialist's account of the human creative act itself—that creative act whereby man is said to constitute 'the world' as a meaningful whole rendered coherent and intelligible by the projects he realizes in it. The Sartrean man, whose being is desire, whose being is therefore 'a lack of being',[1] allegedly brings the meaningful 'world' into being by separating himself from and 'nihilating' the bare, formless, and massive reality which is immediately, totally, and inertly present to his mobile, hungry consciousness. 'The questioner must be able to effect in relation to the questioned a kind of nihilating withdrawal',[2] says Sartre, and in so doing 'man presents himself . . . as the being who causes Nothingness to arise in the world'.[3] For Stirner, indeed, it is not 'Man' from whose nihilating act the world originates. For Stirner it is The Unique One, that absolutely singular, incomparable subject, who negates, dissolves, and re-creates the inert, given reality which he at first confronts. I myself, in my finitude and insularity, am the creative solvent by whose fiat it comes to be that there is a 'world', by whose personal investments an extant totality becomes transformed into an original pattern of meanings. In order to create my world, however, I have to '*annihilate* and *dissolve*' the given world.[4] At every instant I re-authorize my own being as 'creator and creature in one',[5] as the Nothingness which posits itself as its fundamental originative act—and simultaneously as the Nothingness in whose creative depths the old world is consumed and the new world is gestated. 'I am not Nothing in the sense of vacuity,' declares Stirner, 'but the creative Nothing, the Nothing out of which as creator I myself create everything.'[6] Like the Sartrean consciousness, that rift or fissure in Being from which the profile of a 'world' unaccountably emerges, Stirner's Unique One is the articulate void from which the universe of meaning at last issues forth. 'I, this Nothing,' he vouchsafes, 'will put forth my creations from myself.'[7]

[1] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part One, ch. 2, sec. III.
[2] Sartre, op. cit., Part One, ch. 1, sec. V. [3] Sartre, loc. cit.
[4] See D.E., p. 346. [5] D.E., p. 178. [6] D.E., p. 14. [7] D.E., p. 274

For both Stirner and Sartre, then, it is Nothingness which is at the heart of the world, inasmuch as the being who brings the world into being is himself a Nothingness. To confront this almost unbearable truth, however, to accept the burden of solitude and responsibility which it involves, is a challenge from which most men flee in alarm and dismay. The works of Sartre and Heidegger abound in descriptions of the multifarious ways in which men seek to lose themselves in the protective illusions of their society and their age. 'Man', says Heidegger, 'can lose himself to what he meets in the world and be taken over by it'.[1] As men-in-community, cherishing common institutions, revering the time-honoured procedures of society, and reassured by the approved forms and rituals of our collective being, we manage to deceive ourselves into believing that this retreat into comforting anonymity is a positive assent to hallowed and objective realities. We refuse to accept the mysterious and dreadful fact of our own contingency, and instead pretend that our lives are governed by impersonal and autonomous powers, human or divine, deriving their incontestable authority from history or from nature. According to Sartre, the whole human pretence that values exist 'as transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity' is what constitutes 'the spirit of seriousness', which 'it must be the principal result of existential psychoanalysis to make us repudiate'.[2] To pious and serious men, who consider their tribal codes to be 'written in things', the existentialist's irreverence will of course appear as a profane and frivolous mockery. To the existentialist's 'authentic' individual, however, as to Stirner's self-possessed Unique One, the evasions and self-deceits of the tribal consciousness enjoy no special sanctity. 'It is precisely because you hold something sacred that I gibe at you,' says Stirner, 'and even if I respected everything in you, it is precisely what you hold *sacred* that I would not respect... In the word "irreverence" or "impudence" is included every offence that can be committed against spiritual values, against everything men hold sacred.'[3] To 'the spirit of seriousness', therefore, the egoist opposes his own 'criminal frivolity'.

[1] M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Part One, Division One, ch. III (sec. 16).
[2] Sartre, op. cit., Conclusion. [3] D.E., pp. 326–7.

While the solemnity of the 'inauthentic' or self-deceiving consciousness, the hushed reverence with which it surrounds its cherished codes and rituals, may represent its ludicrous aspect, it also has a more tragic aspect, which existentialists have also subjected to their exigent analysis. The tragedy of the collective man, submerged in his illusory tasks and pursuits, is his *alienation*. What he takes for security is really a surrender of the self. The collective man, says Heidegger, has surrendered to the depersonalizing influences of his age and his society, and so has lost the 'power-to-be-himself'.[1] Like Stirner's 'possessed man', he is the prisoner of the 'fixed idea' that his whole life is in mortgage to authorities—Mankind, God, the State—which are lawfully and without question above him;[2] or, equally, he is the plaything of those worldly preoccupations—a career, marriage, material comfort—to whose flattering promises or insidious demands he passively and as a matter of course submits. Alien authorities possess him, fashioning him into the standard or average man, 'the good father', 'the sober citizen'; inherited and automatic preoccupations control him, slylycompensating his self-loss from the cornucopia of mass culture and material civilization. In reality, however, he is a man divided. 'You split yourself in two',[3] says Stirner to the man whose life moves mechanically along the routes laid down for him by his predecessors or superiors. So long as I move meekly and dutifully towards destinations prescribed by society on my behalf, he declares, 'I do not have myself, and am thus a stranger to myself . . . I divide myself into two halves', and 'because I am not yet myself, some Other (such as God, The True Man, The Pious Man, The Man of Reason, The Free Man, or what have you) has become me, has become my own self'.[4] It is this internal scission—this surrender of the self to an alien being, thus degrading my originality and ossifying my possibilities—which is the true meaning of alienation or estrangement, for Stirner as for Heidegger. Like both Heidegger and Sartre, Stirner is concerned to repair this scission, to restore to the self its lost unity. In his 'Rejoinder' to Feuerbach he affirms his intention to

[1] Heidegger, op. cit., Part One, Division One, ch. V (sec. 38).
[2] See D.E., pp. 55–9. [3] D.E., p. 41. [4] D.E., p. 384.

speak on behalf of the full man, against the divided man.[1] And in *Der Einzige* he had stated that 'I forever restore to myself that which is withdrawn from myself'.[2] Although Stirner frequently attacks the notion of 'freedom', both as a social ideal and as an ideal for the self, the 'self-possession' to which he seeks to return has at least a negative kinship with the Sartrean conception of freedom as that which a human being originally *is*. This freedom which I am is, according to Sartre, the freedom to choose. Moreover, the self which chooses is none other than the freedom to choose a self, which 'has value only because it is chosen'.[3] Now, while Stirner has little use for the kind of freedom which consists merely in 'being rid of' this or that, his 'self-possessed individual', like the Sartrean consciousness which is 'entirely and always free,'[4] is said to be '*born free*, a free man from the ground floor up'.[5] It is 'as a *self-possessed individual* that you are really rid of everything, for what still clings to you is what you have adopted, it is your option and your choice'.[6] For Stirner, as for Sartre, my original freedom is my freedom to choose the self which I shall become. When this freedom is surrendered, the alienation which I suffer is at once a servitude and a petrifaction.

Sartre's example of the waiter symbolizes this servitude and illustrates this petrifaction. The waiter in the café can never submerge himself in his role, for it is his being as freedom never to be *merely* a waiter: as a mode of 'not-being', he can never *be* 'the waiter' which he seeks so zealously to become, but it is precisely this kind of transfixed and static being which he covets and which he vainly seeks to realize in his own person.[7] Since a man can never become literally identical with his role, the waiter is continuously deceiving himself: his whole project has been undertaken in 'bad faith'. Sartre would agree with Stirner that 'I have no vocation and follow none',[8] since for Stirner, too, the desire to lose oneself in a role, to give oneself wholly up to a 'vocation', is essentially the desire to become something that one cannot be. By losing myself

[1] See *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 336–8. [2] D.E., loc. cit.
[3] See Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 32.
[4] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, ch. 1, sec. I. [5] D.E., p. 193.
[6] D.E., loc. cit. [7] See Sartre, op. cit., Part One, ch. 2, sec. II. [8] D.E., p. 169.

in a role I seek to fulfil myself, but I am essentially the void which no transfusion of being can ever fill. By giving myself up to a 'vocation' I seek to provide an objective justification for my existence, but I am essentially the nothingness whose existence is forever 'without excuse'.[1] There is no preordained task or function which I am called to perform. There is no such thing as 'my station and its duties'. The free or self-possessed man, says Stirner, will resist this 'principle of *making something out of* us', which rings as a commandment, or perhaps as a salvation, in the grateful ears of the deluded and dispossessed.[2] 'A man is "called" to nothing and has no "vocation" ',[3] I have no duties towards others, and indeed 'I only have a duty towards myself so long as I distinguish myself from myself',[4] so long, that is, as I am not in complete possession of myself. 'Calling—duty—task!' exclaims Stirner:[5] 'Have you tasks if you do not set yourself them?'[6] Instead of uselessly striving to realize my 'true self' by enrolling myself in the service of my imagined 'vocation', let me *enjoy* life—now and as I am—without illusion or regret. And 'enjoyment of life means using life up . . . consuming it in the way that one uses a candle in consuming it'.[7] Stirner's 'proprietor' is most completely himself when he is the consumer, dissipating and annihilating the objects which he appropriates by incorporating them into his own essential vacuity. Like Sartre, for whom 'destruction realizes—more subtly perhaps than creation—the nature of appropriation, since the object is no longer there to display its impenetrability',[8] Stirner considers appropriation to be essentially a violation and dissolution of the objects appropriated, which cease to be alien and become wholly and finally *mine* only when I have destroyed them as 'objects' by 'ingesting' them into my subjectivity, like the Sartrean smoker who 'destructively appropriates' the disappearing tobacco as a symbol of 'the world which is being reabsorbed into vapour so as to re-enter into me'.[9] 'From now on,' concludes Stirner, 'the question is not how one is to win life, but how one is to squander, to enjoy it; not how one

[1] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 34. [2] D.E., p. 283. [3] D.E., p. 382.
[4] D.E., p. 373. [5] D.E., p. 380. [6] D.E., p. 176. [7] D.E., p. 375.
[8] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, ch. 2, sec. II. [9] Loc. cit.

is to realize one's true self, but how one is to dissolve oneself, to live oneself out. . . . I enjoy myself according to my own good pleasure. "Life" is of no concern to me, except as something to be *squandered*.'[1] The principal result of The Unique One's self-interrogation is the discovery of his own frivolity, just as according to Sartre, 'the principal result of existential psychoanalysis must be to make us repudiate the spirit of seriousness'.[2] And thus The Unique One's final posture is that of the cynical profligate who 'squanders himself' in nonchalant solitude, just as the final posture of Sartrean man is that of 'the solitary drunkard' who realizes in his 'quietism' that 'it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or becomes a leader of the nations'.[3]

It goes without saying that for both Stirner and Sartre, who both portray the ultimate irresponsibility and destructiveness of the self-centred, arbitrary individual, there can be no prospect of enduring harmony, far less of genuine communion, among men. 'While I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me', says Sartre. 'Descriptions of concrete behaviour must therefore be seen within the perspective of *conflict*. The original meaning of Being-for-others is conflict.'[4] For Stirner indeed, 'the last and most decided opposition, that of unique individual against unique individual, is fundamentally beyond what is called opposition', since there can be no relations, either of co-operation or of opposition, between individuals each of whom ultimately inhabits his own private and exclusive universe: 'opposition vanishes in complete—*severance* or uniqueness'.[5] The distinction is largely verbal, however: both thinkers agree that men as individuals are wholly disparate and incongruent, that their condition is therefore ultimately one of total isolation, and that in their 'concrete behaviour' they in fact and inevitably work out a grim pattern of endless conflict. We cannot participate in 'Humanity' as an objective totality, Sartre argues, since such a totality could emerge only in the presence of a 'third party', a Witness above and beyond men whose creative scrutiny would transform us into an objective and meaningful unity: but such a Witness

[1] D.E., pp. 375–6. [2] Sartre, op. cit., Conclusion. [3] Loc. cit.
[4] Op. cit., Part Three, ch. 3, sec. I. [5] D.E., p. 243.

would be God, who for Sartre is always 'the radically absent', and thus any attempt to assemble men into some 'intersubjective whole' is always foredoomed to failure.[1] For Stirner, too, the idea of 'Humanity' *is* no more than an *idea*, without objective reality—an idea, moreover, which is essentially 'religious', since it requires me to regulate my personal interests under the constant and authoritative surveillance of a new kind of 'Supreme Being': Humanism is merely 'a step forward in the domain of religion',[2] and as for the attempt to create a form of human society in which individuals will work with growing harmony to produce a common good—all such attempts are necessarily vain, since they seek to give body and substance to something which has all along been only a fetish and an illusion.[3]

Stirner considers all human relationships to be founded on exploitation, in one form or another. This truth is not something to be deplored, but something to be accepted—and in turn exploited. In this last respect he differs from Heidegger, who after annotating and illustrating the various modes of 'inauthentic being-with-others' at length suggests an existential basis for a possible 'authentic being-with-others'. The man who has resolved to be himself in the face of an alien world has begun to exist authentically for himself, and such a man, Heidegger suggests, will choose also to exist authentically for others in undertaking 'to liberate them, to become their conscience as it were and recall them to themselves';[4] he will lay the foundations of authentic community by helping to liberate others to become their true selves. Now, it might seem as if Stirner were also trying to found an authentic human community based on mutual respect between free and sovereign individuals when, for example, he declares that 'only when you are unique can you have intercourse with others as they really are',[5] or when he proposes to replace the community in which the individual is 'bound to others by a bond' by a form of association in which 'individual really *unites* with individual'.[6] However, when The Unique One is said to encounter others, no longer merely as

[1] Sartre, op. cit., Part Three, ch. 3, sec. III.
[2] D.E., p. 215.
[3] See D.E., p. 138.
[4] See Macquarrie, op. cit., p. 213.
[5] D.E., p. 159.
[6] D.E., p. 161.

abstract 'men', but as 'an I and a Thou',[1] this must not be taken to mean that he responds to their deepest being as persons, far less that he achieves any kind of genuine 'communion' with them. What he is in fact announcing is that in his relations with others he will not allow himself to be bemused and confounded by meaningless appeals to 'human rights' or other moral abstractions, but will view every new individual as an extant natural object to be explored, thoroughly and without prejudice, for the fresh potentialities of exploitation it may offer. 'Let us not aspire to community,' says Stirner, 'but to *one-sideness*. . . . Let us seek in others only means and organs, which we may use as our property . . . . For me no one is a person to be respected . . . but solely an *object* . . . an interesting or uninteresting object, useful or useless.'[2] To The Unique One, another individual is 'nothing but—my food', an object to be 'consumed', whose only relationship to me is that of '*usableness*, utility, use'.[3] Thus Stirner, unlike Heidegger, forecloses any possibility of fulfilment in human relationships, but of course it is precisely in this respect that his views most strikingly resemble those of Sartre. Sartre's 'lover', indeed, 'does not desire to possess the beloved as one possesses a thing; he demands a special type of appropriation'[4]: nevertheless for Sartre, as for Stirner, even the project of love is a project to appropriate and exploit. And of course for Sartre the alternative attitude which I can assume in the presence of the Other, the attitude of 'hate', is also an attempt to seize and reduce the Other's subjectivity, although this time by destroying it. I can try to destroy the subjectivity of another by killing him, by sadistic aggression against him, by subjugating and enslaving him, or by concentrating on my own subjectivity in partial or total indifference to his: in all these ways I may try to convert the free subject before me into some kind of passive object, which I can manipulate or ignore.[5] The Sartrean man who seeks to degrade persons into 'things' is thus engaged on the project which Stirner's Unique One claims to have accomplished. 'I do not allow myself to be disturbed in my self-enjoy-

[1] D.E., p. 209. [2] D.E., pp. 364–5. [3] D.E., p. 347.
[4] Sartre, op. cit., Part Three, ch. 3, sec. I.
[5] Sartre, op. cit., Part Three, ch. 3, sec. II.

ment,' claims Stirner, since 'I practise a Terrorism of the Self, which drives off every human consideration'.[1] And Sartre's 'practical solipsist', who 'acts as if he were alone in the world', who 'brushes against "people" as he brushes against a wall',[2] is thus prescribing for himself the same emetic by means of which The Unique One claims to have purged his own world of 'persons' and of the nauseous 'values' which persons inevitably exude. Of course the project of the Sartrean individual is said to be undertaken 'in bad faith', and is in any case vain, since on the destruction of the subjectivity of others his own objectivity would founder; but Stirner is in no doubt that The Unique One's project can be completely carried through, and carried through instantaneously by a single act of self-consciousness in which his world will be simultaneously depopulated and devalued. 'I want merely to be I', declares Stirner. 'I think nothing of Nature, men and their laws, human society and its love, and I sever every general connection with it, even that of language. To all the demands of your Ought, to all the pronouncements of your categorical Judgment, I oppose the "ataraxy" of my Ego.'[3]

It is evident that many of the central and distinctive themes of atheistic existentialism are prefigured, sometimes with uncanny accuracy, in the work of Stirner and in the person of his metaphysical representative, The Unique One. Just as Kierkegaard is acknowledged to be the founder of Christian existentialism, therefore, it would seem that Stirner has some claim to be considered the earliest definite precursor of atheistic existentialism. Of course, there is no one set of propositions to which all of the thinkers I have called 'atheistic existentialists' would necessarily give their assent: 'the atheistic existentialist' with whom Stirner invites comparison is inevitably a composite figure, and between two actual atheistic existentialists—Heidegger and Sartre, for example—the points of contrast and repulsion may be almost as numerous as the points of agreement and confirmation.[4] Nevertheless, it

[1] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 412. [2] Sartre, loc. cit. [3] Stirner, loc. cit.

[4] This is particularly so when the later development of these thinkers is considered. The Heidegger here treated is of course the earlier Heidegger, of *Being*

remains true that the philosophers to whom I refer share certain characteristic preoccupations—the preoccupation with man's ultimate 'nothingness', for example, or with man's existential freedom to create and identify himself through his fleeting and finite projects—and that they tend to express their preoccupation with these themes in a philosophical language of a highly idiomatic and immediately recognizable kind. And it remains true that many of these general themes find their clearest and earliest anticipation in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, where, moreover, they are rehearsed in an idiom and by means of concepts which frequently and strikingly resemble those of Stirner's existentialist successors. As a phenomenological experiment, *Der Einzige* clearly belongs, methodologically and structurally, to the philosophical lineage which culminates in *Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness*. However, as we have seen, Stirner's philosophy also resembles the philosophies of particular existentialist thinkers in many points of relative detail. It is by no means the case that all of the principal points of resemblance have been recorded in the brief comparison which has been attempted in the present chapter. The resemblance between Stirner's concept of 'proprietary thinking' and the existentialist concept of 'subjective truth', for example, raises fundamental epistemological and metaphysical issues which will require to be examined in some detail in the final chapter of the next Part. But perhaps enough has already been said to show that in *Der Einzige* we are unmistakably presented (to transfer the phrase of Martin Buber) with the 'exact conceptual prediction' of those distinctive themes by which, a century later, the representatives of atheistic existentialism have above all been preoccupied.

and Time (1927)—certainly his greatest work and certainly a key influence on atheistic existentialism. (See *supra*, p. 171, footnote 1.) Here it may also be noted that the Sartrean 'existentialism' which I have taken as my model is the apolitical existentialism of *Being and Nothingness* (1943), not the Marxist existentialism of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960): whatever their relative importance in respect to the thought of Sartre himself, the earlier work is by far the more representative expression of those themes which are constitutive of 'atheistic existentialism' as it is here understood.

To anticipate the diagnoses made by a future generation of philosophers, however, is not necessarily to prescribe the same cures. The world inhabited by the Sartrean existentialist, by Heidegger's 'authentic individual', and by Stirner's Unique One, may be essentially the same world, and they may be agreed in their diagnosis of its salient features, but when they come to determine their personal modes of comportment within this world their paths diverge, step by step, until they reach its polar points. To live as an egoist, complacently enjoying one's status and possessions, is, says Heidegger, to be in a state of 'fallen being', to refuse to confront the authentic possibilities of one's existence. Moreover, the kind of egoism which seeks to reduce other persons to objects—'interesting or uninteresting objects'—is, according to Sartre, inevitably suicidal; while the project of self-realization or 'self-possession', for Sartre, is also inherently doomed, since man's 'appropriative choice of being' is essentially an attempt to 'found himself' by 'losing himself', and so man reveals himself as an essentially 'useless passion'.[1] Stirner's conception of egoistic self-satisfaction will be considered more fully in Chapter XI, where it will be specifically contrasted with the Sartrean thesis of man's ultimate and inevitable frustration. But perhaps the ambivalence of Stirner's relationship to existentialism is most clearly to be seen by examining his probable attitude to such existentialist concepts as 'commitment' and 'responsibility', for it is in the light of these concepts that the existentialist pilots his notion of an 'authentic' human life. The philosophy of The Unique One is a philosophy of disengagement, it is a refusal to become ultimately involved or identified with any of the temporary objects of his enjoyment and recreation, and since these figure in his interest only as objects to *play* with, motivelessly and arbitrarily, it is above all a philosophy of irresponsibility. The Unique One does not know either the 'anguish' of Sartrean responsibility or the 'dread' which, according to Heidegger, accompanies every true insight into the pointlessness of human existence. In one sense he may be said to have founded an 'authentic' life for himself, since he has retrieved his existence from its alienation and has reinstated himself in full possession of

[1] Sartre, op. cit., Part Four, ch. 2, sec. III.

himself; but the distinctively existentialist concept of 'authenticity' summoning man to a high existential 'Resolve' or to a recognition of 'Concern' as the root structure of human existence, has no place in his experience: rootless and unconcerned, The Unique One traces the changing circles of his factitious identity in consultation with himself alone, and without reference to any ideal of personal 'integrity' other than the integrity which comes from refusing to be debauched by personal ideals.

Stirner's refusal of responsibility and his consequent immunity to existentialist 'anguish' will be appraised in Chapter IX, while his repudiation of 'commitment' (and of 'authenticity' in so far as this represents an ideal integrity of character unifying and therefore transcending the scattered and fluctuating interests of the arbitrary individual) will be expounded and criticized in Chapter X. Indeed, throughout the whole of the next Part it will be my primary concern to illuminate the philosophical posture of Stirner's Unique One in explicit contrast with that assumed by the hero of existentialist choice. It will there be seen that the posture and deportment of The Unique One precisely illustrate his chosen role as the existentialist anti-hero. We have seen in the present chapter that Stirner offers us a phenomenological analysis of the self and its situation which vividly presages the existentialist's account of man's being-in-the-world, his being-with-others, and the alienation which may befall him in both these modes of being. As diagnosticians, Stirner and the existentialists may differ on many topics of comparative detail and on some topics of undoubted substance, but the broad impression justly remains that it is the same situation they are analysing, and that at the level of existential analysis they are engaged in the same procedures, and with similar conceptual apparatus. At the point where phenomenological analysis ends, however, at the point where a free existential choice can at last be made in light of the clarified situation and its revealed possibilities—it is at this crucial point that Stirner and the existentialists abruptly and irrevocably part company. If it is to a common situation that they compose their responses, the responses which they choose to make could not be more diametrically opposed. By his response the existentialist stamps his

situation as a 'predicament' which demands to be *overcome*, a predicament to which his authentic choice is the *solution*: fundamentally, it is the truth of nihilism which has to be overcome, and it is the artifice of commitment which is his chosen solution. The response of the egoist, by contrast, is an artifice which reflects and carries forward the nihilistic truth which it confronts. Stirner's egoism is a *nihilistic egoism*, gratuitously adopted in a world to which all responses are gratuitous, and consciously withholding meaning from a situation which it found to be originally meaningless. The nihilistic egoist's original project of self-satisfaction can only be carried through in a world which mirrors his own disintegration—and it is precisely in this world that, according to his own avowals, the existentialist's project of personal integrity is doomed.

PART THREE

Nihilistic Egoism

CHAPTER IX

TOTAL ATHEISM

LIKE Goethe's Mephistopheles, Max Stirner epitomizes 'the spirit who perpetually denies'. His symbolic act of self-assertion in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* takes the form of a systematic and absolute denial of every principle by which the hearts and the minds of men have been moved. At the end of his metaphysical rebellion he alone remains, the unmoved mover who has revealed himself by destroying everything that might have muffled or confined him. 'Away with every cause which is not wholly and entirely my cause!'[1] His activity of perpetual denial is in intention directed against everything alien to his own finite being and arbitrary purposes, and is successively waged against the ideas of moral obligation, of the State, of society and its laws, and finally against the ideas of humanity and of altruistic human relationships—all of which, according to The Unique One, derive their noxious and parasitic existence by disrupting the exclusive being of the finite individual and estranging him from his own distinct interests. The idea, however, which of all ideas most purely expresses the individual's inner disruption and self-loss, is the idea of *God*, and it is accordingly this idea, above all, which Stirner is inflexibly resolved to destroy, in each and every of its forms. The programme of militant atheism, conceived and initiated by his immediate precursors and contemporaries, although conducted with vigour and ingenuity by the Bauers and the Feuerbachs had not yet been carried through to its logical completion, and this was precisely the task which in *Der Einzige* Stirner promptly undertook to discharge. By his radical denial of God Stirner not only means to deny the actual existence and objective agency of a given entity, a 'Supreme Being': he also means to destroy the *idea* of 'God', since it is this idea, sym-

[1] D.E., p. 14.

bolizing men's deepest needs, which most poignantly expresses men's perennial inadequacy, the ultimate breakdown of their self-sufficiency, and since, comprehending their highest aspirations, it is above all this idea which summarizes men's credulity, their incurable proclivity to self-deception and self-prostration. It is not merely the God of Christianity whom, along with the Gods of other religions, Stirner wishes to depose: it is the office of 'God' which he proposes to abolish once and for all. As a historical document, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* must be the most uncompromising of atheistic manifestos. It self-consciously sets out to define the *ne plus ultra* of radical atheism.

The publication of Stirner's book in fact marked the climax of a great religious debate which had been raging in Germany for over a decade, causing scandal and offence to the faithful and obliging intellectually scrupulous Christians to re-examine the very foundations of their theism. The first seeds of the disturbance had been sown by Hegel, who at many points in his writings had clearly stated his view that religion, although signifying a distinctive and culminating stage in the evolution of self-consciousness whereby it becomes conscious of itself as the ultimate truth and reality of all things, was nevertheless a *stage* in this whole process, a stage, moreover, which was finally to besuperseded by the self-realization of the Idea in speculative philosophy as the Absolute's purest knowledge of itself. Hegel acknowledged that Christianity, as the 'absolute or revealed religion', expresses more perfectly than any other the advent of the divine nature to full self-consciousness in man. In Christian theism, however, this truth is as yet expressed figuratively or pictorially, with an unsurpassed wealth of imaginative illustration but with the inevitable distortions which accompany any attempt to represent ultimate truth by means of sensuous images. The transcendent God who saves us by His grace is a misleading pictorial expression for the saving forces which are immanent in self-conscious Spirit. Already in Hegel the dualistic conception of a personal Deity who transcends the world and man had been virtually replaced by the monistic conception of 'God' as the symbol for the historical World-Spirit as it emerges at last from its long dialectical self-

definition into full consciousness of itself as the motor, end, and being of the whole world-process.

It was of course the Hegelian Left which sought to develop Hegel's phenomenology of religion in favour of an outright atheism, and the Young Hegelians who were most notoriously responsible for this development were of course Strauss, Feuerbach, and Bruno Bauer. Like Hegel, Strauss considered Christianity to be the most adequate religious symbol of the ideal truths of philosophy, but unlike Hegel he denied that formal 'truth' could be intelligibly attributed to this religious symbol. The propositions of Christianity should be interpreted, not as dogmas, but as 'myths', reflecting the traditions and aspirations of the community which produced them. It thus becomes the task of the critic to unveilthehuman and social truths which the myths enshrine, and in the case of Christianity, the highest and the most universal religion, Strauss claimed, the critic can decipher its distinctive myths to announce its unique and final insight to mankind. This Strauss took to be the insight into the ultimate unity of the divine and the human, not indeed of God and one particular man, Jesus Christ, but of God and all men, God and the human spirit as such. 'God' was no longer transcendent to the human process of social evolution but was held to be incarnate in this process, its realization and its justification. By applying the phenomenological methods of Hegel to his own brilliant Scriptural exegesis, Strauss had apparently shown the ideas of a supranatural, other-worldly realm of being and of a separate, personal, creative Deity to he essentially otiose for a true understanding of the valid meaning of Christianity.

The next steps were independently taken, in different directions, by Feuerbach and Bauer. Whereas Strauss, in demythologizing the Scriptural narratives as a means to disclosing and universalizing their underlying truths, had sincerely believed himself to be fulfilling the spirit of Christianity, it rapidly became Bauer's explicit intention, by documentary criticism and philosophical analysis, to destroy the Christian religion both in the letter and in the spirit, and in so doing to make an end of dogmatic religion in every shape and form. Criticism could not only show the Gos-

pels to be a tissue of unhistorical fantasies, the private inventions of the individual evangelists; it could go on to destroy the metaphysical presuppositions of traditional theism, and eventually to subvert every metaphysical or moral principle which sought to establish itself as a dogma demanding permanent assent. The activity of total intellectual analysis, dissolving all limits to the sovereign critical consciousness, leaves no ideal untouched, except the ideal which is perpetually realized in the free activity of pure criticism itself. The atheistic consciousness, Bauer implied, destroys not only the God of theism, but every concept or doctrine which lays claim to authority over the free human spirit: it is the infinitely mobile consciousness which, refusing to invest itself in any principle, carries its activity to the point where nothing is left but the chaste infinity of its own ceaseless dialectic.

Unlike Bauer, Feuerbach had no desire to extinguish that distinctive aspiration of men which is the spring of their religious speculations. For Feuerbach, indeed, the idea of God is a projection of human self-conciousness, the reflection on to a mythical being of man's own capacity for reason, will, and love; and in this sense of course, as the literally false belief in an objective Deity who is above and beyond his human worshippers, religion is a phase of human consciousness which has to be overcome. But if Christianity, the highest expression of theism, has to be overcome, it must be overcome in a way which preserves and elevates its core of inner truth. The idea of God as a separate and transcendent being may be relinquished, Feuerbach declared, without relinquishing the ideals of perfect knowledge, perfect will, and perfect love which were traditionally attributed to the God of theism. It is these *attributes* which are truly 'divine'. A human consciousness which had returned to itself in its own pristine sovereignty would above all recognize in the ideal of perfect love the universal law for human nature, since in the social unity of mankind there may be fulfilled, in joyful reality, the highest aspiration which in theism could only be fulfilled on the plane of fantasy. An infinitely perfectible mankind is therefore the true bearer of a rediscovered 'divinity', and it is men's infinite capacity for love which above all deserves to be considered

sacred. The religion of humanity, Feuerbach concluded, must be the religion of boundless love.

By 1844, when Stirner's book made its appearance, the religious debate had reached a point of high tension. Amid the Young Hegelians Christianity seemed to have been finally superseded by the humanistic atheism of Feuerbach and the still more radical atheism of the Critical school. It was at this point of the debate, however, that Stirner made his sensational entry, confounding the embattled protagonists by his declaration that their systems were one and all infected by the essential germ of that theism which they imagined themselves to have destroyed. The history of Christianity, according to Stirner, has been the history of its attempts to provide 'existence, corporeity, personality, reality' for the Christian God,[1] and the upshot of the Young Hegelian critique of Christianity has simply been to add yet another chapter to this history. 'Even the most recent revolts against God are nothing but the most extreme exertions of "theological learning", that is, theological insurrections'.[2] We have already seen the gist of Stirner's criticisms of Bauer and Feuerbach. The celebrated 'sovereign consciousness' of the Critics is theoretically omnipotent only because it has usurped the mythical omnipotence of the sovereign God whom it has deposed. Just as Hegel offered us a deified 'Spirit' in place of the God of theism, so Bauer and his associates now offer us a deified 'Consciousness'. The critical Consciousness, however, criticizing everything in the light of pure thought, is like every ideal of reason essentially impersonal, overriding the particular interests of every individual in the name of its own canons of perfect rationality, since it is always the nature of reason to subsume the particular in the universal. Immaculately rational, the critical Consciousness claims to be perfectly disinterested in its pursuit of consistency, forgetting that a disinterested pursuit can only be a pursuit of the uninteresting. Stirner sharply reminds the Critics that the only human reality is the reality of the specific, concrete individual, in all his immediacy, and that the individual is gross body as well as pure thought, a 'whole fellow', with intellectual interests undoubtedly, but also

[1] D.E., p. 425.

[2] D.E., p. 38.

with sensuous, emotional, financial and many other interests, all of them equally valid for pursuit, and all of them *interests*, unintelligible without their reference to a living, acting self who is conscious of them as interests *for him*. Bauer's deified consciousness is as much the enemy of self as the God of Christianity ever was. Indefatigable, omnivorous, infinite, it is the new theological absolute transcending the discrete reality of the finite individual. Like the God of Christianity, however, it has one crucial defect: it is a transparent fiction, for like the Spirit of Hegel and the God of the Christians the pure critical Consciousness is no more than the idealized and therefore illusory reflection of the one form of consciousness which is truly extant in the world—the self-consciousness of that brute and opaque reality represented by the exclusive, finite individual in all his facticity and singularity.

This crucial defect is also shared by the deified 'Humanity' which Feuerbach summons us to worship. The world contains only a miscellany of distinct individuals, all of whom indeed possess 'humanity' as one of their manifold attributes: but there is nothing special, far less sacred, about this particular attribute, and there is certainly nothing in the world which corresponds to a 'Humanity' above and beyond the miscellaneous individuals whom we designate as 'human beings'. There is, if you like, a 'human essence'—consisting, according to Feuerbach, of reason, will, and love—but why should I revere someone's 'essential humanity' rather than his essential Jewishness, for example, or his essential pugnacity or gluttony? 'If you are indeed more than a Jew . . . you are also more than a "human being"; whereas these are mere ideas, you are a physical reality.'[1] For Feuerbach, of course, humanity is the individual's 'highest essence' (*höchstes Wesen*). But this amounts to saying that 'Humanity' should be for every individual a new 'Supreme Being' (*das höchste Wesen*), and this is in fact precisely what Feuerbach does say: 'Man is to man the Supreme Being'. Thus the professed 'atheism' of Feuerbach only succeeds in replacing one 'Supreme Being' by another, and the slain God of Christianity is at last resurrected in the idealized Man of Feuerbach. The true atheist, by contrast, is the

[1] D.E., p. 150.

man who, conscious of his own irreducible individuality, his utter uniqueness, can therefore say, 'I am neither God nor Man',[1] and who can thereby exorcize God in both his manifestations, as the Heavenly Father of the Christians and as the earthly brotherhood of the humanitarians. The true atheist rejects the fetish of the humanists, as he rejects all religious fetishes, which of their nature seek to transcend the private interests of the finite, self-contained individual. Feuerbach indeed rejects the God of Christianity because the Christian God is supposed to be transcendent to his creation and his human creatures, but the true atheist will likewise reject this new God, Humanity, because it is likewise transcendent *to him*. He will reject the ideal of human unity through universal human love, since this too, as an ideal, claims to transcend his own self-sufficient and exclusive being. He will reject loving human relationships, since these also, according to Feuerbach, require a surrender of that self which the atheist knows to be the one sure reality. The true atheist, in short, will complete his rejection of the God of Love by rejecting the idea of Love as God.

Stirner's contribution to the German religious debate of the 1840s was, it may be said, effectively to bring the whole debate to a momentary and stupefied halt. The full consequences of thoroughgoing atheism were now disclosed for all to see. It was now patently clear that there could be no further advance along the lines marked out by Strauss, Bauer, and Feuerbach, and that any future attempt to found a form of atheism which would preserve the ethical and existential truths of Christianity while avoiding Christian superstition and metaphysical confusion had been stultified by Stirner in advance. Socialists like Marx might evolve a kind of sociological atheism, tracing the origin of religious illusion to those pathological social conditions which socialism proposes to transform; but the evolution of strictly philosophical atheism, exposing the metaphysical absurdities and the moral casuistries inherent in the idea of 'God', had plainly reached its definitive limit in *Der Einzige*. It is surely in this respect, if in any, that Stirner must be deemed to have rendered a significant in-

[1] D.E., p. 44.

tellectual service not only to his contemporaries but also to his historical successors. Every attempt to reinterpret Christian belief in the ways which will accommodate the intellectual, emotional, and moral objections of its critics will, it may be claimed, at last meet with shipwreck on the real rock of offence, the rock which Stirner, as the most unflinching navigator through these shoals, has precisely located and described. Particular objections to Christian belief may be ingeniously evaded, other objections may be wholly or partially answered, and perhaps even the substance of some objections may be officially incorporated into the reconstructed theology. But the abiding scandal of Christianity, which the most extreme surgery cannot remove without destroying the essential character of Christianity as a religion, is located, as Stirner clearly saw, in the category of 'the holy' or 'the sacred' itself, since it is in this category, of which the Christian God is merely the most notorious personification, that all religion is and must be grounded. Just as the orthodox Christian tends to view with suspicion the endeavours of his more radical co-religionists to recast Christian belief in more liberal, less dogmatic form—endeavours which, he fears, may end up by infecting Christian belief with the essential atheism which they seek to combat; so the truly radical atheist, determined to recover and protect the original denial which is at the heart of all atheism, will condemn every professedly 'atheistic' philosophy which, by designating certain aspirations or ideals as 'sacred', in effect offers a new sanctuary to the exiled God. The truly radical atheist, the total atheist, is the man to whom nothing is sacred. 'He alone is the true atheist', says Feuerbach, 'to whom the attributes of God—for example, love, wisdom, justice—are nothing', and in so saying he defines exactly the standpoint of Stirner. If God existed, the finite, self-centred individual would be violated at the very core of his secretive being by the omnipresent authority of his Creator. But equally, if 'divinity' exists, if for example human personality is truly 'sacred' or if the fulfilment of obligations is a 'holy' duty, then my loss of sovereignty is equally catastrophic, my self-possession is equally invaded and my privacy equally defiled. The total atheist cannot reject God and at the same time cherish those

qualities in sole virtue of which God *was* 'God'. It is the *holiness* of the Holy One—it is 'the sacred' in whatever guise it appears—which the total atheist finally revolts from and denounces.

The immediate effect of Stirner's work, then, was to redefine the boundaries of the theological debate then in progress in Germany, and abruptly to alter its character and direction. For his delineation of 'total atheism', however, a far wider and more permanent relevance may be claimed. The boundary-position which Stirner staked should be of the deepest interest to thinkers at any period which is experiencing rapid and comprehensive theological change. It is of particular interest to our own period, which, like Stirner's, is witnessing much disquiet among Christians troubled by the intellectual and moral assumptions of their theism as well as much self-inquiry among 'atheists' in deep need of a truth to give meaning to a world without God. The theological crisis of our own day, as of Stirner's, has been preceded by numerous, largely abortive attempts to provide a meaningful and undogmatic interpretation of Christian belief which will at once speak to the sceptical, secular minds of modern men and will yet preserve the distinctive character of Christianity as a unique and final revelation. The attempts of the early 'Modernists' such as Loisy or Fosdick, for whom the history of Christianity was to be regarded as primarily the dynamic history of man's spiritual evolution, in many respects resembled the massive ambition of Hegel to discover in Christianity a pictorial representation of the dialectical processes by which Spirit historically unfolds itself: however, like Hegelianism, Modernism excited the distrust of more orthodox churchmen, and, also like Hegelianism, even its most thoroughgoing attempts to secularize Christian dogma would in any case have failed to appease the radical atheist, who would in any case refuse, as a finite, transient, sensuous individual, to crucify himself in the interests of an infinite and eternal process of purely spiritual evolution, even if he could bring himself to believe in the actuality of such a process. The endeavours, in the opening decades of the present century, of liberal Protestant theologians such as Harnack, or of such American religious thinkers as Gladden and Rauschenbusch, who saw in Christianity

an essentially ethical gospel or a summons to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating and reconstituting human relations, may be said to have met with a similar fate, since to orthodox churchmen such 'ethical' or 'social' reinterpretations seemed to emasculate Christian belief by diminishing its claims to literal cosmic truth; while, although such reinterpretations may have made a meaningful appeal to the moral and social sympathies of many people who were intellectually atheist, to the man who like Stirner is temperamentally as well as intellectually an uncompromising and impenitent atheist, to the truly radical atheist, they would represent merely another attempt to rescue—this time by transplanting it to the realms of personal or social conduct—the old familiar concept of 'the sacred' which had been successfully evicted from the realm of objective being. The logical role notionally played by the radical atheist in such theological controversies may be a purely negative one. But by occupying the immovable boundary-point in such controversies, he may at least serve to define the area under dispute, and by occupying it on behalf of an ultimate atheism stripped to its essential and irreducible meaning he in addition marks the extreme point beyond which theological compromise cannot in any circumstances go.

This is surely the part which Stirner's conception of total atheism is fitted to play in the theological controversies of our own time. All the protagonists in the recent 'debate about God' have seemed to share a concealed premise, since all—theists and 'atheists' alike—have seemed to be agreed on the contemporary necessity of vindicating the concept of 'the sacred', although they differ about the apparently factual question concerning the existence of a personal Deity who is himself the uniquely sacred object. Thus the late Professor Tillich has said that 'perhaps you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even the word itself', since we may be said to know what 'God' really signifies so long as we are able to speak meaningfully of 'the depths of your life . . . of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation'.[1] And

[1] P. Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, sermon on 'The Depth of Existence'.

according to Professor Bultmann it is urgently necessary to 'demythologize' the Gospels, that is, 'to produce an existentialist interpretation of the dualistic mythology of the New Testament'[1] by eliminating its references to alleged supernatural powers and miraculous happenings, 'if the truth of the New Testament proclamation is to be preserved'[2] and if the unique existential significance of the event of Christ for men's lives is to be credibly disclosed; only when the Word is authentically proclaimed can men take the decision of faith and so arrive at a new understanding of self in which 'a new self is constituted in place of the old',[3] abandoning all self-contrived security in favour of a free and trustful self-delivery to the open future. In the view of Professor Tillich, evidently, a man may experience the power of divine grace although he cannot bring himself to believe in the objective existence of a personal Deity. In Bultmann's view, a man may appropriate the redemptive significance of the event of Christ for his life without subscribing to a literal belief in his Virgin Birth or in the historicity of the Resurrection.

Now, it may well be true that thinkers like Tillich and Bultmann, by liberating Christian faith from unnecessary metaphysical assumptions or mythological accretions, have opened up new possibilities of belief for numerous people to whom the supranatural categories of orthodox theism are intellectually repugnant. Perhaps their followers consider that in so doing they have created the beginnings of a significant modern answer to the challenge of atheism. This claim may be admitted if we understand by 'atheism' the rejection of apparently factual hypotheses concerning the existence of a personal Deity and of an other-worldly, supranatural dimension of being. If, however, 'atheism' is understood in a more radical sense, if it is the total atheism delineated above all by Stirner that is under consideration, then such attempts must be judged to fail completely. The total atheist, instructed by Stirner, will without hesitation confirm that 'the sacred', 'God', is indeed that which claims

[1] R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', Part I, sec. B (5), in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. W. Bartsch.

[2] Bultmann, op. cit., Part I, sec. B (1).

[3] Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. One, Part II, ch. 5, sec. C, § 35.

his 'ultimate concern'; it is the unconditioned or unconditional, which demands to be 'taken seriously without reservation'. But the total atheist, like Stirner, precisely denies that there is anything which is worthy of being taken with unconditional seriousness, and what he affirms is precisely his intention to remain ultimately unconcerned. The total atheist, in the person of The Unique One, is the man who practises a deliberate and heedless frivolity. He will readily agree that 'the sacred', 'God', is indeed that which summons us to 'turn our backs on self . . ., surrendering all our self-confidence'[1] in order to enter into an entirely new mode of personal being; 'the meaning of that which was wrought in Christ' is indeed that 'authentic life becomes possible only when man is delivered from himself', that is, when he ceases to be 'self-assertive man'.[2] But this self-surrender is precisely what the total atheist refuses to make; he may on occasion be prepared to surrender this or that particular interest if the terms offered are favourable, but what Christianity—including the new existential Christianity—requires is always an *unconditional* surrender, a renunciation, in fact, of that very detached and finite self which is the locus and foundation of *all* a man's selfish interests, and it is precisely this act of self-crucifixion which the total atheist declines to commit. Composed, self-sufficient, unmoved, the total atheist is the man who, like Stirner, declines to relinquish his own closed and finite being in favour of an 'authentic existence' which is in any case not being offered *to him* but only to the stranger who would emerge from his act of self-destruction.

In recent years the more adventurous Christian apologists have increasingly expressed their willingness, like Dr. John Robinson, 'to be an agnostic with the agnostics, even an atheist with the atheists',[3] in the hope that by reopening the terms of their Christian commitment, by dissociating it from the obsolete cosmology and untenable metaphysics of traditional theism, they may enable agnostics and atheists to share this commitment without an overwhelming sense of intellectual retreat. By emphasizing that there

[1] Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', Part II, sec. A (1).
[2] Bultmann, op. cit., Part II, sec. B (1).
[3] J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, London, 1963, p. 127.

are superstitions from which one may have to be *delivered* in order to become a Christian, these apologists hope to convince the hard-headed scientists and technologists of the twentieth century that Christianity is by no means inconsistent with their daily intellectual assumptions. Now, a truly radical atheist would undoubtedly agree with Dr. Robinson on the contemporary impossibility of 'persuading oneself of the existence of a super-Being beyond the world endowed with personal qualities'.[1] But such an atheist would go on to point out the equal impossibility of believing the propositions which Robinson offers in place of the discredited theism. The chief of these is the proposition 'that personality is of *ultimate* significance in the constitution of the universe, that in personal relationships we touch the final meaning of existence as nowhere else'.[2] To believe that 'in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely what ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality' is admitted by Robinson himself to be 'in face of all the evidence . . . a tremendous act of faith'.[3] It is 'frankly incredible' and 'takes an almost impossible amount of believing'[4] unless, apparently, a tremendous act of faith is made in a spirit of mental submission which does not seem so very far removed, after all, from the mental suicide required by the most dogmatic versions of the Christian religion. Even if this proposition were credible, however, the radical atheist of the type foreshadowed by Stirner would still remain essentially untouched. The 'truth' that in pure personal relationship we apprehend the ultimate constitution of reality requires not only the assent of the intellect but also an engagement of the will, in fact a response of the whole person, if it is to be accepted; and of course it is this response which the total atheist refuses to make, for reasons which we have seen. If this is a truth which needs to be 'encountered' by giving oneself up wholly to a 'pure personal relationship', it is a truth which may well reach all manner of formerly sceptical men, all manner of 'agnostics and atheists', but it cannot possibly reach the total atheist foreshadowed by Stirner, whose relationships with others—including his emotional relation-

[1] Robinson, op. cit., p. 49.
[2] Op. cit., pp. 48–9.
[3] Op. cit., p. 49.
[4] Op. cit., p. 128

ships—represent no more than pragmatic investments, in which part of his substance is expended in calculation of a direct and of course profitable return. This is why the famous peroration of Buber, searchingly relevant if aimed at the humane and spiritual atheist, if aimed at the truly radical atheist inevitably falls upon deaf ears. According to Buber, 'when he, too, who abhors the name, and believes himself to be godless, gives his whole being to addressing the Thou of his life, as a Thou that cannot be limited by another, he addresses God'.[1] The truly radical atheist, however, the total atheist, is the man who is resolved to preserve himself, come what may: he will never surrender 'his whole being', or even 'give' himself in part, since he always exacts a realistic price for any partial concessions he may choose to make. No one has free claims on any part of his being or his property, and thus he certainly does not acknowledge the existence of any other person, any 'Thou', who has limitless claims upon him. Indeed it is precisely this (among many other things) that the total atheist denies when he says, 'There is no God'.

'Theological statements,' says Robinson, 'are not a description of "the highest Being" but an analysis of the depths of personal relationships—or, rather, an analysis of the depths of *all* experience "interpreted by love".'[2] This Christian apologist seeks to liberate his readers from the particular dogma of a 'Supreme Being' beyond time and space. What he does not and cannot do, however, is to liberate them from theological dogma in general, and it is therefore open to the total atheist to retort, as Stirner retorted to Feuerbach, 'How thoroughly theological is this liberation which he labours to give us!'[3] I am not to be identified with the love I may happen to feel, nor is my being exhaustively defined by any of the responses I may choose to make, since I am the being whom 'names name not', I am 'this transitory, mortal Creator who lives by consuming himself' in a perpetual return to the nothingness which I essentially exist to be.[4] 'What do we gain, then,' demands Stirner, 'when for the sake of a change we transfer into ourselves the divine outside us? It was just because *we* are not the

[1] M. Buber, *I and Thou*, Part Three.
[2] Robinson, op. cit., p. 49.
[3] D.E., p. 42.
[4] D.E., p. 429.

Spirit that dwells in us, it was just for that reason we originally had to take it and set it outside ourselves.'[1] Unlike my natural feelings and responses, which are at least temporarily and wholly *mine* even if they are not *me*, 'the divine' or 'the sacred' is essentially that which can never be either me or wholly and exclusively mine; it is the totally alien, which always claims to go beyond and to envelop me. 'The sacred', 'God', inevitably seeks to appropriate me and cannot be appropriated by me until I have destroyed its sanctity, whatever form that may take, by degrading and domesticating it, by reducing it, that is, to the condition of all the other finite, natural, disposable objects which I am perpetually able to resume and enjoy. Whether it is located, in the person of a Supreme Being, beyond time and space, or whether it is enshrined, as apologists like Bonhoeffer insist, in the heart of men's everyday activities and concerns, 'the sacred' is, for Stirner and for the total atheist, above all that which has to be destroyed *as* 'sacred' lest the individual, *as* a finite, self-sufficient, and self-possessed individual, be himself destroyed by it. The dissent of the true atheist is a dissent from 'the holy' when this is viewed as a sacred reality apart from and above the common world; but his refusal is also and no less a refusal to 'hallow the profane' by acknowledging the presence of 'a "beyond" in the midst of our life'.[2] Like Stirner, the true atheist is the man who lives and moves and has his being in a world which, he has decided, shall be irredeemably and totally profane.

What, then, is the essential difference between the total atheist and those other atheists, like Feuerbach in Stirner's day or Huxley in our own, who are 'atheists' only inasmuch as they reject the classical theism of orthodox Christianity? The essential difference is surely that, whereas the latter are ultimately concerned to preserve and restore the ethical and existential insights of Christianity by liberating them from their mythological, supranatural setting and expressing them (perhaps in harmony with the highest insights of other religions) in terms of a modern philosophical and scientific view of the world and man, it is the avowed intention of the total atheist to impugn the claims of religion in

[1] D.E., p. 43. [2] Robinson, op. cit., p. 86.

whatever setting they are found and in whatever terms they are couched. Whatever it may be which, not only in classical theism but also in 'atheistic' Christianity and in the religions of humanity or of love, presumes to capture the hearts and minds of men; whatever it may be in these and the other historic religions, theistic or atheistic, which presumes to engage our wills and enrol us wholly in its service: it is *this* which the total atheist denies, it is *against this* that he musters the last protesting ounce of his undiminished being. The total atheist is like all other atheists in that his act of rejection is of course, first and foremost, a rejection of 'theism'; he is unlike all other atheists, however, in that his act of rejection is not merely a theoretical rejection of the abstract claims of theism to be a truthful account of the nature and organization of reality: it is above all a rejection of those values and ideals of which theism is merely the most vivid and exemplary portrayal and which are the essential meaning of theism as a dynamic and persuasive religious form, but which may also be and in fact are expressed (although in less graphic fashion) in many other forms of religious commitment. The total atheist's act of rejection is not merely a rejection of the personal God of Christian theism, for the God of theism is rejected by many men who are nevertheless profoundly religious. He of course rejects the theistic religion of the Christians, but he also rejects the cosmic religion of the pantheists, the ethical religion of the humanists, and indeed every form of religious commitment which men's ingenuity or folly has proposed. The total atheist is the man who has chosen to dwell in the dimension of the profoundly irreligious. What he seeks to expose is the nature of the religious illusion in all its forms. If, like Feuerbach, he seeks 'the essence of religion', he does so, like Stirner, in order to destroy it. In doing so he may render the incidental intellectual service of showing what is essentially involved in the religious commitment; but it is the prohibitive cost of such commitment which he is above all resolved to demonstrate and, by his personal revocation, to condemn.

Stirner's chief claim to our continuing attention arises, then, from

his unique contribution to the development and self-understanding of radical atheism. In *Der Einzige* he took upon himself to demonstrate, with harrowing thoroughness, exactly what is involved in the full denial of God. To deny the Omnipresent in merely one of the forms in which He is present is not enough: God must be denied in his very essence and meaning. 'From religion', says Stirner, 'I do indeed learn the means for the "vanquishing of the world", but not how I am to subdue *God* too and become master of him; for God "is the spirit". And this same spirit, of which I am unable to become master, may have the most manifold shapes: he may be called God or the Spirit of the People, the State, Family, Reason, or even—Freedom, Humanity, Man.'[1] He goes on: 'The way in which objects are conceived admits of extreme variety, even as God, Christ, the world were and are conceived in the most manifold ways. In this respect everyone is a "dissenter", and after bloody combats this much has at least been attained, that opposite views about one and the same object are no longer condemned as heresies worthy of death. The "dissenters" have become reconciled. But why should I only dissent *about* a thing? Why not push dissent to its last extreme, that of no longer having any concern for the thing in question, and therefore thinking its nothingness, crushing it entirely? Then the *conception* itself has an end, because there is no longer anything to conceive of. Why should I say, for example, "God is not Allah, nor Brahma, nor Jehovah, but - God"? Why not say instead, "God is nothing but a deception"?'[2]

The idea of 'God', says Stirner, is essentially the idea of an 'overmastering object', to which I am bound to be 'right submissive': it is the idea of 'the absolute under which I ought to bend'.[3] Thus the denial of God is not merely the denial of Allah, or of Jehovah, or of Christ: it is the denial that there is any absolute over us, requiring our submission and deserving our devotion. Now, if we ask *what* it is that is being claimed when adherents of different religions claim, for example, that Allah is 'God', or that Christ is 'God', or that Goodness is 'God', the answer to this question will furnish us with a definition of those

[1] D.E., p. 390. [2] D.E., pp. 395–6. [3] D.E., p. 396.

attributes which are essentially involved in the idea of 'God', that is, in the title of 'God' as such, regardless of the identities of the particular claimants who are competing for this title. If the adherents of these different religions are really engaged in meaningful dispute, they must be engaged in making the *same* claim, albeit on behalf of different candidates. Of course, there are many related concepts which coalesce to form the idea of 'God', whether it be the God of Christianity, the God of religious humanism, or the God of any other religion that is under consideration. However, all these related concepts may perhaps be compounded into a single, completely general formulation, in which their essential purport may be summarized by simply saying that 'God' is always and at least '*the adequate object of worship*'. Whatever specific characteristics may be peculiar to the particular candidates for the office of 'God', to say of any one of these that he is truly God is surely to say that he is a proper object of the distinctively religious attitude, the attitude of the *worshipper*. And to deny, with Stirner and the total atheist, that there is a God of any kind whatsoever, is therefore to deny that there is anything, in the world or out of it, which is worthy of our worship.

Naturally, 'worship' here means more than simple homage or service, however zealously these outward duties may be performed; it means more than natural love or fear, however intensely these emotions may be inwardly felt. 'Worship' means a total engagement and surrender of the whole person, who, even in the very moment of surrender, recognizes the worthlessness of what he is surrendering in comparison with the transcendent glory of the reality to which surrender is made. Creation is full of things which may elicit sensuous fear; only the Creator, however, is the proper object of 'holy dread'. Creation is full of things for which we may feel instinctive love; but only the Creator is the proper object of 'sacred adoration'. The 'awe' which overcomes the worshipper is a fusion of this dread and this adoration, and it is only before an object of *supreme* reality and *transcendent* graciousness that 'awe' in this sense can arise. There must be an *infinite* distance between the worshipper and the worshipped, which is always 'the wholly other' and which is therefore the *mysterium*

tremendum, immeasurable by finite human reason and unattainable by finite human endeavour. Moreover, for the reality worshipped to be truly worthy of worship, its worth must be infinite and unconditional, utterly eclipsing the conditioned worth of those finite, natural objects which we ordinarily esteem and desire. If, then, when a religious humanist like Feuerbach declares that 'Love is God' he is in effect declaring that Love is a proper object of worship, the love in question cannot be the transient love of finite human experience, but rather an ideal of perfect love which infinitely surpasses the conditioned love of ordinary experience and in the light of which the latter is to be judged. A humanist who did not recognize such an ideal perfection could not properly be styled a *religious* humanist. And of course a man who did not recognize this or any other ideal perfection would be precisely the *homo irreligiosus* of whom Stirner set out to be the definitive exemplar. The profoundly irreligious man, the total atheist, as we have seen, is the *homo calculans*, into whose calculations, inevitably, only objects of finite utility, of conditional and therefore measurable worth, can gain entry.

The radical atheist denies that there is anything which is truly worthy of worship, because he denies that there is any object possessing those attributes which an object must necessarily possess if it is to be an *adequate* or proper object of 'worship' in the sense explained. Now, while this is not merely a denial that there is any being which possesses the attributes traditionally ascribed to the God of theism (since it is the idea of 'God' as such, not merely the God of the theists, that he is resolved to destroy), nevertheless it is in his denial of the attributes traditionally ascribed to the theistic God that the full nature and scale of the radical atheist's denial perhaps emerge most clearly. He of course denies that the attributes of the theistic God—infinity, eternity, immutability, perfect truthfulness, and so on—are in fact collocated in a single, unitary being; but, more defiantly, he also denies that the 'divine' attributes themselves, considered independently as ideal conceptions, have any inherent claims on the person and conduct of the existing, concrete individual.

Thus, for the total atheist as for Stirner, the rejection of the idea of 'God' is not just the rejection of the idea of an infinite being. It is the rejection of the idea of 'the infinite' as an ideal category dwarfing and degrading the finite reality of the extant individual. It is the affirmation of a philosophy of radical finitude. Because it is a rejection of the Universal, the Absolute, his rejection of the idea of 'God' is at the same time an affirmation of the reality of the particular individual, to whose unique being all things are relative. The rejection of God's 'eternity' means for Stirner the affirmation of The Unique One's temporal finitude, his mortality, his measured flight from nothingness into nothingness. The rejection of God's 'immutability' means the affirmation of The Unique One's fickle and protean being, his perpetual and momentary self-dissolution and self-transformation. The rejection of the idea of God as 'perfect truth' is simultaneously an affirmation of The Unique One's inventive, proprietorial attitude to knowledge, of which he makes arbitrary disposition according to his own interests or inclinations: God's 'omniscience' would be a violation of his privacy and a destruction of his subjectivity. The rejection of the idea of God as 'the gracious lawgiver' is an affirmation of the lawlessness of the self-sufficient individual, his determination to go his own way without looking either to the right or to the left, either below or above. If the God of theism furnishes us with a spiritual image of the unified totality, the rejection of this image of God is by implication an affirmation of the separateness and concreteness of the recalcitrant individual.

The total atheist's rejection of the idea of 'God', then, is in effect the rejection of a certain view of the nature of reality and of man's place in it, and at the same time it is the affirmation of a diametrically contrary view of man's existence and of the world in which that existence may be chosen. An objective totality is deposed in favour of the utter subjectivity of the self-contained individual. Total atheism, according to Stirner, is identical with an utterly heedless individualism. To deny that any feature of reality deserves to be held 'sacred' is to deny that anything is worthy of 'being taken seriously without any reservation'. And to reject 'the spirit of seriousness' is to affirm, with the

dying Sir Ensor Doone, that 'there is nothing in the world to fear—nothing to revere, to worship, nothing to trust, and nothing to love': at least it is to affirm that there is nothing worthy of our absolute trust, our unconditional love. It is an affirmation of the personal irreverence, the bottomless frivolity, of the individual atheist. The rejection of the idea of 'God' is a rejection of 'religion' in every sense, but above all it is a rejection of 're-ligion' as that which binds and restrains the self-assertive individual, binding him to a body of worshippers by placing him in bondage to the object of their common worship. The total atheist refuses to be bound to a religious fellowship or to be bounded by the divine principle of such a fellowship. In both senses his atheism is a philosophy of bound-less self-assertion. Furthermore, if—as a refusal of God's grace—his atheism is a refusal to be 'obliged' in the sense of being beholden to an external Giver for his gracious gift, it is also a refusal of 'ob-ligation' in the sense of being bound by and accountable to a Judge who may authoritatively bind him to render an account of his conduct. His denial of God is thus an affirmation of the atheist's own strictly 'irresponsible' being: it is an affirmation of the individual's impregnable sovereignty within his own distant and lonely kingdom.

'The question of God', says Dr. Robinson, 'is the question of transcendence.'[1] Belief in God involves the acknowledgement of a reality which forever surpasses finite human experience and endeavour, however far the reach of human knowledge and achievement may be extended. If transcendence is 'a feature of *all* our experience—*in depth*',[2] then God is the depth which cannot be plumbed, since the concept of a 'divine depth' is the concept of a depth which is *infinitely* deep: God is the unfathomable. To believe in God is to acknowledge an ideal excellence which is always above and beyond the particular, finite excellences discoverable in our experience, since these natural excellences, of however high an order they may be, always admit of finite evaluation and may themselves in time be excelled as our experience widens. From a personal standpoint this belief in God as the eternally transcendent excellence involves a perpetual dis-

[1] Robinson, op. cit., p. 49. [2] Op. cit., p. 52.

satisfaction with the world as it is (and indeed as it ever will be in any finite span of time, whatever degree of improvement may be introduced) and a perpetual dissatisfaction with myself as I am, whatever the degree of success with which I may have laboured to improve myself: belief in God carries with it a 'judgment' of the world and myself.

The supreme denial made by the atheist, it may therefore be said, is his denial of transcendence. He is through and through 'the natural man' of Otto, who 'is quite unable to "shudder" or feel horror in the true sense of the word, for "shuddering" is something more than natural, ordinary fear'.[1] Horror, dread, awe, adoration—these are the responses of the man who feels himself comprehended by the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which cannot be comprehended by him because it eternally transcends him. The atheist, by contrast, limits his concern to what can be comprehended, to what can be grasped or appropriated by him. His measured responses are proportioned to the finite possibilities of injury or of gratification which he perceives a situation to contain, and to any intimations which cannot be deciphered and domesticated he is uniformly and systematically indifferent. His interests lie wholly in the sphere of the present, the concrete, the actual, which can be discovered, managed, and enjoyed here and now. This is not a new 'worship of the positive', since even in the very moment of appropriating the thing before him he perceives its transience and affirms its nothingness. It is, however, a massive acceptance of things as they are, without lamenting their imperfections or wishing the world otherwise; and it is an affirmation, by the individual atheist, of himself just as he is, without regretting his limitations or wishing himself better.

There is yet another dimension to the radical atheist's denial of the transcendent. The transcendent is supposed to be that which, lying above and beyond our present situation, is nevertheless ideally required if our present situation is to be appraised and understood. Just as the idea of an end or purpose is required in order to evaluate a man's present actions, or even to render them intelligible; just as an absent object of desire has to be postulated

[1] R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, ch. IV.

if a man's present state of desire is to be judged and interpreted; so, it is argued, all our actual, conditioned experiences point in their imperfection to a transcendent ideal of unconditioned perfection, without which these particular, fleeting experiences would possess neither value nor meaning. Our particular, fleeting experiences of love, for example, flawed as they often are by the intrusion of alien, selfish motives and bitterly frustrated as they often are by the harsh logic of impersonal circumstances, are nevertheless supposed to point, in their very dissatisfaction, to an ideal of divine Love, of ultimate and perfect satisfaction, in the light of which they can be seen to possess, even in the hour of their apparent defeat, a transcendent significance and worth eclipsing any merely finite achievement or reward. Now, it is precisely this concept of transcendent worth and significance which the total atheist repudiates. His denial of the idea of 'God' is a denial that existence has any intrinsic or final worth. His denial of God is a denial that life has any objective and global meaning. The atheist's denial of transcendence is the denial that there is any ultimate purpose in terms of which the world might be vindicated and redeemed. It is an affirmation of meaninglessness and worthlessness as the constitutive features of ultimate reality, and at the same time it is an affirmation of motivelessness and wantonness as the dominant traits of the individual atheist: knowing all his choices to be equally gratuitous, he does not pretend to justify them by appeal to some fictitious standard of objective reason, for the atheist's denial of transcendence is also a denial of reason as an objective standard transcending, and therefore in the last analysis alien to, the particular, concrete individuals between whom it purports to arbitrate. Perhaps the Saxon Minster of the Interior was wiser than he knew when he described *Der Einzige* as 'too absurd'. At least in the sense that he denies that there is any rational course to steer or any rational destination to head for, Stirner might be said to have anticipated the total atheists of the twentieth century in their view of life as a futile venture into the Absurd.

In the hands of a total atheist like Stirner, then, the denial of the idea of 'God' is equivalent to an affirmation of the ultimate

meaninglessness of existence. Of course, there are brute regularities in nature which our experience can discover; there are orderly sequences of natural events which the scientist can record; and in this sense our experience can be said to possess literal or empirical meaning. What the total atheist denies (and by this stage he has become identical with the nihilist) is that our experience has any ultimate moral or metaphysical meaning. The factual regularities discovered by the scientist are ultimately inexplicable, if metaphysical explanation requires reference to a *Summum Bonum* purposively directing the world of brute facts; in the absence of such a directive principle, the scientific order is seen to be a metaphysical chaos. If the idea of 'God' is the idea of a unifying principle which transforms our centrifugal experiences into a coherent and significant whole, then the atheist's denial of God is a denial of the possibility of any such ideal unity. In Stirner this denial of the ideal of unity is carried to its extreme. If a perfect unity of experience is to be realized, harmonizing and consecrating the fragmentary endeavours of men, it will be realized above all in that 'unity between man and man' of which Feuerbach spoke or in that complete personal and spiritual union which for the Christian is the meaning of purest love. According to Stirner, however, the realization of the whole can be accomplished only by suppressing the reality of the part; the perfect realization of an infinite whole of undisturbed moral unity can be accomplished, therefore, only at the cost of engulfing every last vestige of self-assertive individuality which might threaten to disturb it. Stirner would reject even the ideal of an organic whole in which, it might be claimed, the individuality of the parts is not destroyed but rather enriched and transfigured by their inner identity, their absolute coincidence, with the ideal totality; what he wants to preserve is the pure exteriority of the unrelated parts, their impenetrable identity *as parts;* what he wants to preserve is the exclusive being of the irreducible individual who articulates himself *as* purely this part-icular individual. In Stirner's hands, radical atheism becomes the self-affirmation of the solitary, self-centred subject, whose life is irredeemably 'partial' both in the sense that he is resolved to pursue his own selfish interests in disregard of the impartial ideals

of objective reason and justice, and also in the sense that he is ceaselessly conscious of his own distinct and contracted being in opposition to the unifying dialectic of social relationships and personal love. Radical atheism, under the direction of Stirner, has become identical with the self-affirmation of the unmoved egoist. The self-surrender of the theist has been replaced by the self-concentration of the dispassionate narcissist. The objective and total meaning vouchsafed by the theocentric universe has been simultaneously destroyed and replaced, in and through a permanent crisis of meaninglessness, by an egocentric universe invested with the subjective or 'partial' meaning of its finite creator. The total atheist, in short, discovers himself in the person of the nihilist in order to consummate himself in the person of the egoist.

Belief in 'God', declares Stirner, is always the belief in a 'highest essence', whether this is supposed to be realized in the theistic God, in the spirit of Humanity, in the ideal of Love, or in the ideals of social unity and justice. 'But suppose that a man were to smile compassionately at the whole conflict about the highest essence, as a Christian might smile at the verbal duel between a Shiite and a Sunnite or between a Brahmin and a Buddhist: such a man would hold the hypothesis of a highest essence as nothing and the whole conflict based on this as a futile game. It makes no difference whatsoever to him whether the One God or the Triune God, the Lutheran God or the *Etre Suprême*, or even no God at all, but only 'Mankind', is held to represent the highest essence; for in his eyes these servants of a highest essence are all religious men, the ranting atheist no less than the most devout Christian.'[1] Nor does it make any difference to him, Stirner would add, whether the democratic State or the socialist society, personal relationships or abstract justice, Love, Freedom, or Duty, is held to represent the highest essence; for if these ideals are put forward as 'sacred' ideals transcending, in their infinite perfection, the finite and fallible individuals whose 'worship' they claim, then they are *religious* ideals, and the fanatical democrat and socialist, the fanatical lover, libertarian, and moralist, are all equally religious men. The man who, agreeing with Kant that 'something has a

[1] D.E., pp. 50–1.

dignity if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent',[1] affirms his belief in 'human dignity' in this sense, who affirms, that is, his belief in the 'pricelessness' of human life, is thus essentially a religious man, since the truly religious attitude consists in affirming the infinite, the literally immeasurable worth of the objects which it considers sacred. The truly irreligious man on the contrary, as we have seen, is the *homo calculans* who, believing that everything has its price, that a loss in one direction can always be compounded elsewhere, therefore equates 'pricelessness' with worthlessness, and whose denial of God is therefore at the same time a denial of human dignity.[2] The truly irreligious man, the calculating egoist, has finite, pragmatic interests, which he is prepared to reduce or expand, to abandon or exchange, in the light of the fluctuating expediencies; there is nothing which he is not prepared to alter or replace; there is nothing that he would not sell. The full rejection of religion, Stirner claims, is thus the rejection of human dignity, freedom, justice, and love, as eternal ideals demanding our unqualified homage and raised above all considerations of selfish expediency. If atheism is to complete itself, if the atheist's original denial is to be converted into a total denial, it must become a denial of all men's social and moral ideals. For the total atheist, as Camus puts it, morality is 'the last face of the God who requires to be destroyed'.[3]

What Stirner has sought to demonstrate is the ultimate identity of total atheism and total egoism. If atheism is a theological denial, it is also an ethical and social denial. If it is man's escape from the clutches of an alien Deity, it is also the individual's escape from the alien authority of the State, society, and his fellow men. It is the individual's self-liberation on all fronts; it is his self-possession before all claimants. Moreover, if by 'the world' we signify a stable, meaningful, organized and unitary totality, then the atheist's self-liberation may also be described as a liberation from the world; his self-possession is a posture of cosmic defiance.

[1] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, ch. II.

[2] Cf. Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, Berlin and Leipzig, 1931, p. 130. 'There is no God, the swelling masses clamour. As a result man becomes worthless; he can be slaughtered in any numbers, because he is nothing.'

[3] Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, ch. II, sec. on 'L'Affirmation absolue'.

His atheism is the denial that reality has any fixed and necessary meaning. It is an affirmation of the ultimate insignificance of all things. The egoism of the total atheist is thus the egoism of the nihilist, and thus the total atheist, according to Stirner, is ultimately identical with the *nihilistic egoist.*

To say of Stirner's atheism that it is a form of 'nihilism' is to say, then, that it sets out to dissolve 'the world' as a comprehensive structure of objective meanings, to expose it as a metaphysical chaos. But to say of his nihilism that it is a nihilistic 'egoism' is further to say that it sets out to reorganize this chaos by a unilateral act of metaphysical creation, to impose upon it a new order of meanings which will reflect the self-absorbed personality of the individual nihilist. The nihilistic egoist is 'the centre of his world',[1] which he perpetually re-creates from the nothingness to which it is perpetually consigned. It is in this respect that Stirner's world most resembles that of the atheistic existentialist, from whose 'estranged world', according to Helmut Kuhn, 'truth as the disclosure of meaning is not to be wrested'. Kuhn continues: 'If at all, truth must be found in the inner man, as a condition or act of mind. . . . Meaning, the Existentialist affirms, is not to be revealed as though it were available in a realm of essences. It must rather be brought into existence; it must be lived. . . . The revelation of meaninglessness is meaningful—and the foundation of all meaning. First we must run against the unyielding wall of an estranged world, then be sent back by rebound, as it were, into our inwardness. The redeeming answer must be discovered in the encounter with Nothingness.'[2] For the nihilistic egoist, too, objective meaning and truth, along with objective purpose and values, have disappeared for ever in the metaphysical deluge which follows the death of God, and in their place he freely invents a private meaning, a subjective truth, for the unique and personal world which he can henceforth inhabit undisturbed. According to Karl Löwith, this metaphysical emancipation to be accomplished by 'nonreligious man' was heralded by both Stirner and Nietzsche: 'For the ancient world, Stirner says, the "world" was truth; for the

[1] *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, p. 354.
[2] Kuhn, *Encounter with Nothingness*, ch. IV.

Christian, "spirit" was truth, and this spiritualized world is brought to an end in the left-wing Hegelians, with their faith in the spirit of "mankind". But for the future world, as Nietzsche says, "nothing is true"; everything is permissible, because in this world the only truth is what the individual can appropriate for himself without becoming estranged from himself. From this point of view, that of the "I", human truth is nothing more and nothing less than what the individual can in fact be.'[1]

Now, if the nihilistic egoist designates himself as the sole proprietor of his private 'world', which he perpetually reproduces from its pristine nothingness by a personal act of metaphysical creation, conferring an arbitrary and provisional meaning on what he affirms to be otherwise meaningless, it might well seem as if he has after all simply cast himself in the role of the God which he professedly set out to abolish. Is the atheism of The Unique One really a *total* atheism, which having repudiated the very concept of 'divinity' is therefore ultimately indifferent to the outcome of the struggle between the various candidates who lay claim to the spurious title of 'God'? Or is it his intention, by eliminating all the various candidates—Jehovah, Christ, the State, Love, Freedom, Virtue, and all the others—who have been nominated to fill the office of 'God', thereby to clear the way for his own seizure of this office? Has The Unique One dispossessed the Christian God, for example, in order that he may usurp the vacant throne?

This is the impression which some of Stirner's more oracular utterances might seem to give. 'It is said of God: "Names name Thee not". That is true of me: no *concept* can express me, nothing that can be put forward as my essence can exhaust me; they are no more than names. Likewise it is said of God that He is perfect and is not required to strive after perfection. But that is also true of me.'[2] These are the words with which Stirner closes his book, which he has opened with the declaration: 'I am the creative Nothing, the Nothing out of which as creator I myself create everything'.[3] The Unique One has evidently taken over the role of 'Creator' from the deposed God of Christianity, then, for like

[1] Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, Part Two, ch. V, sec. 7.
[2] D.E., p. 429. [3] D.E., p. 14.

the Christian God he claims to 'create everything out of nothing'. Like the God of Christian mysticism, also, The Unique One claims to be beyond definition and beyond thought, 'the unspeakable', who can be expressed only in 'an expression which expresses . . . Nothing';[1] like the mystics' God, The Unique One baffles all formulation, and every attempt to define his essence inevitably ends up in empty tautologies, since ' "You are unique" means no more than "You are you" '.[2] Moreover, the 'transcendence' which he denies to the Christian God (and to all other 'Gods') is precisely the transcendence which he himself claims to *be*; the egoist is always more than the sum of the interests in which he has invested, he is already beyond the particular pleasure which he enjoys, and indeed it is because he is the 'proprietor' of his world that he stands beyond and aloof from it, as a proprietor stands above his property; however much, as its creator, The Unique One expends himself in his creation, he can at any moment dissolve his interest in it and return to his own unencumbered being, perpetually sloughing the empty shell of the world that he has sucked dry. Like the God of Christianity, The Unique One is 'alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made'.[3] And of course, since the only value possessed by anything is the value which he himself has gratuitously conferred upon it, it may be said of him, as of the Christian God, that he does not derive any glory from his works and possessions 'but only manifests his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them', and that he has 'most sovereign dominion' over all things in his world, 'to do for them, by them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth'.[4]

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to say that The Unique One was putting himself forward to fill the place of God. His act of 'creation' is not strictly similar to the fiat of the Christian Creator, to whom all things owe their existence. The Unique One is the author of the moral order and unity of his universe, he alone invests the contents of his universe with such significance as they possess, he is the source of all the metaphysical meaning to be

[1] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 347.
[2] Op. cit., p. 349.
[3] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch. II, para. II.
[4] See loc. cit.

found in it: but he does not literally create its sheer being. He imposes his personal meaning on the raw, amorphous stuff to which he has reduced his experience, but he does not call the brute stuff itself into existence. The 'Nothing' out of which he 'creates everything' is not a pure absence of being: it is rather a total absence of objective meaning and intrinsic value. Nor is The Unique One literally a cosmic architect, arranging and administering a pre-existent stuff into the natural patterns which science methodically discovers. He is rather the existential artist, recapturing his experience in formulae which convert it into a metaphysical image of the personal world he inhabits. Furthermore, The Unique One does not claim, like the Christian God, to be 'absolute, infinite, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient': his recalcitrantly particular and finite existence is a limited flight through time to an unknown but definite term. He has no illusions about his own power, which he knows will always be restricted by circumstances and other persons; for his unique satisfaction lies in exercising such power as he possesses in full consciousness that it is his alone, to be used as he chooses to direct, without consulting the interests or wishes of anyone but himself and without referring to the authority of any agency which claims jurisdiction over him. The Unique One is the utterly singular subject, isolated in his own self-partiality. He is 'this transitory, mortal Creator, who lives by consuming himself'[1] and who, unhindered in his perpetual 'flow and dissolution',[2] is constantly truncating his present being in calculated preparation for the future which he already confronts. He does not put himself in the place of 'God' as 'the adequate object of worship', for he does not reverence himself in any final or absolute sense; his self-regard is purely that of a man who is conscious of his own handicaps and limitations but who does not believe that in virtue of these he is bound to defer to others more advantageously situated or of naturally richer endowment than himself; he does not worship any other and he does not 'worship' himself.

Thus the atheism of Stirner really is a *total* atheism. If he puts himself in the place of the Gods whom he has deposed, he does not

[2] D.E., p. 429. [3] D.E., p. 229.

posit himself as a new 'God', he does not end up by deifying his Unique One in the way that Feuerbach had deified Humanity and Bauer had deified the critical Consciousness. To The Unique One nothing is sacred, not even the Nothing which he himself is. His nihilism is not a *worship* of Nothingness, any more than his egoism is a worship of himself. His cynical self-interest is not to be confused with pious self-reverence. His atheism is a total atheism, because in place of the pure Infinite of religion he has installed the finite and carnal reality of the promiscuous, transient individual.

In several respects, as has been said, the atheism of *Der Einzige* closely resembles the radical atheism of such leading existentialist atheists as Heidegger and Sartre. For the existentialists, the collapse of belief in God is also the collapse of 'the world' as a meaningful structure enshrining objective values. To the existentialist, however, this collapse of meaning and value appears as a metaphysical disaster. It is a cosmic catastrophe, which fills those courageous enough to acknowledge it with 'anguish' or 'dread'. 'The world in which I exist', says Heidegger, 'has sunk into insignificance; and the world which is thus disclosed is one in which entities can be freed only in the character of having no involvement. Dread is dreadful in the face of the "nothing" of the world.... Dread discloses an insignificance of the world; and this insignificance reveals the nullity of that with which one can concern oneself.'[1] Elsewhere Heidegger describes dread as 'the key-mood . . . through which we are brought face to face with Nothing itself' and in which 'all things, and we with them, sink into a sort of indifference', because 'there is nothing to hold on to: the only thing that remains and overwhelms us while all things slip away is this "nothing".'[2] For Heidegger, to discover the ultimate meaninglessness of existence is necessarily to be overcome by an emotion of overwhelming poignancy and of unique existential significance, a sinister and 'uncanny' emotion which is quite different from ordinary feelings of natural boredom or fear.

According to Sartre, my sense of being cast adrift in a meaning-

[1] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Part One, Division Two, ch. IV (sec. 68 (b)).
[2] Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?*

less and purposeless world is accompanied by the crucial feeling which he calls existential 'anguish', and which is inseparably associated with the consciousness of my total 'responsibility' for my own existence and for the kind of world in which that existence has been chosen. 'The world', says Sartre, 'by means of its very articulation refers to us exactly the image of what we are. . . . It is by surpassing the world towards ourselves that we make it appear such as it is. We choose the world, not in its contexture as in-itself but in its meaning, by choosing ourselves. . . we make the world appear as world. . . . The value of things, their instrumental role, do nothing more than to outline my image—that is, my choice. . . . Thus we are fully conscious of the choice which we are; and . . . this consciousness is expressed by the two-fold "feeling" of anguish and responsibility. Anguish, abandonment, responsibility, whether muted or full strength, constitute the quality of our consciousness in so far as this is pure and simple freedom.'[1] This existential 'anguish', which is so like the 'dread' of Heidegger, arises from man's experience of his 'abandonment.' 'And when we speak of "abandonment"', says Sartre, 'we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end. . . . The existentialist finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist. . . . Dostoevsky once wrote "If God did not exist, everything would bepermitted"; and that, for existentialism, is the starting-point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. . . . Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free.'[2] To experience the anguish of existence, in Sartre's view, is to experience a 'sense of complete and profound responsibility' for the world in which one has chosen to live.

[1] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, ch. 1, sec. I.

[2] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, pp. 33–4.

Existential anguish is akin to the other forms of anguish which we feel whenever we have to make a choice for which ultimately we alone will be responsible, but the truly existential anguish has a unique emotional tonality of personal 'despair', since in the moment of choosing our personal world we 'realize that it has value only because it is chosen'.[1]

Now, it is perhaps at this point that the total atheist like Stirner might appositely accuse the existentialists of a failure of nerve. Certainly, their descriptions of existential anguish or dread, which is supposed to be crucially different from our ordinary feelings of natural distress and is supposed to yield a uniquely authoritative insight into the nature of existence, are often highly reminiscent of the descriptions which religious writers are prone to give of their characteristic experiences. Indeed, in many respects the experience of existential dread might be said to be a quasi-religious experience, the kind of experience which only a fundamentally religious person would be likely to suffer. The despair of which Sartre speaks seems to be the kind of despair which could only be felt by someone who originally entertained religious expectations of the universe and who was therefore ripe to suffer an agonizing personal crisis in the aftermath of disenchantment. To this religious despair the genuinely total atheist, living without religious hope, would be immune. Like Stirner's Unique One, he can confront the ultimate meaninglessness of life without being moved and can contemplate the fragility of his own solution without lament. His atheism has gone beyond the atheism of the existentialists, since he not only claims to impose his personal meaning on the metaphysical chaos by his unique creative act: the original chaos itself is the voluntary product of his philosophical artifice, the result of his original act of metaphysical destruction. In contemplating the meaninglessness of existence he experiences no anguish, since he himself—as the conscious nihilist—is the deliberate agent of meaninglessness. Unlike Sartre, Stirner does not 'find it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist', since it is he himself who has chosen that no 'God' shall be allowed to exist. Whereas the existentialist considers

[1] Op. cit., p. 32.

himself 'condemned' to create his personal world in the unavoidable absence of God, the nihilistic egoist has decreed the banishment of God so that he may from the start create his personal world alone and without distraction. The total atheist does not require to discover, or to demonstrate, the non-existence of God: he is the most radical of atheists because the God-lessness of the world is the self-sought result of his own deliberate and perpetual choice.

Moreover, as we have seen, the total atheist's refusal of God is also a refusal of moral responsibility. Like Sartre, he would indeed accept 'responsibility' in its unencumbered, morally neutral sense as simply the 'consciousness of being the incontestable author of an event or of an object'; Stirner would agree with Sartre that the individual creative subject is indeed 'the one by whom it happens that *there is* a world'.[1] But of the 'complete and profound responsibility' which carries with it an ineluctable burden of anguish and despair, of the 'responsible' consciousness in the full-blown existentialist sense of a cosmically agonized consciousness, the total atheist knows nothing. Why should my responsibility for the world be accompanied by a cosmic anguish, unless this responsibility essentially involves a sense of *moral* responsibility (which Sartre of course does not admit)? And how can I experience a true sense of moral responsibility, if there is no God for me to be responsible *to*? To say that I am responsible for my world is merely another way of saying that I am its sole creator. In no sense is it to say that I am 'liable' for it, 'accountable' for it, since there *is* no God to whom I am obliged to answer, there is no one to whom I must render an account. In the moral sense of the word, I am strictly *irresponsible*.

To describe myself as 'abandoned' would be equally perverse. According to Sartre, I 'find myself suddenly alone and without help'[2] in the universe because I have been abandoned by God. If this is the experience of the existentialist atheist, it is certainly not the experience of the total atheist. The total atheist does not find himself abandoned by God: it is God who is abandoned by the total atheist. As the sole creator of his private world, his ex-

[1] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, ch. I, sec. III. [2] Loc. cit.

perience is indeed one of total existential solitude, but for the total atheist there is no pathos or tragedy about this solitude: it is rather a situation to be relished, an achievement to be studiously guarded. To say that God has 'died' is an ambiguous metaphor, which carries with it the implication that we have been left luckless orphans. The truth of the matter, for Stirner and the total atheist, is that God has been sent packing, and that henceforward I can enjoy the world as I please, without fear or scruple. The God-lessness of the world, for the true atheist, is something to be viewed with complacent satisfaction.

Thus, radical as the atheism of such existentialists as Heidegger and Sartre may be, the atheism of The Unique One is more radical still. It might even be claimed that his is the more profoundly 'existential' atheism. The Sartrean anguish, the Heideggerian dread, it might be claimed, are signs of an ultimate inward failure, the failure to choose the God-lessness of the world as something to be not only apprehended but also lived and willed. The existentialists' apprehension of the meaninglessness of existence fills them with apprehension. Their encounter with Nothingness may be an authentic and unflinching one, but if it is an encounter which fills them with horror, if it is an experience from which they recoil inwardly even while they force themselves to confront it, then here is one experience—and this the philosophically primordial and existentially crucial one—which they refuse to appropriate existentially, which they refuse to make their own. In the end their atheism is a reluctant atheism. The Unique One, on the other hand, as the total atheist, not only apprehends the God-lessness of the world, the meaninglessness of existence, but also actively wills and lives it, apprehending it without apprehension because he has freely chosen it. In this sense, as an atheism which is spontaneously appropriated as an act of personal affirmation, it is the more truly 'existential' atheism. What Stirner, in the person of The Unique One, has above all shown is that the ultimate death of God can take place only by the individual's own act of cool and systematic deicide, with no aftermath of remorse. The total atheist is indeed 'without excuse', but he has made it be that no excuses are needed.

CHAPTER X

THE NIHILIST

THE issue which is at the heart of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* is one to which subsequent European thinkers have returned with increasing urgency. The vision which Stirner unfolds is the vision of a world without God and hence without any unifying or directive principle; it is the vision of a meaningless world, in which there are no inscribed purposes or true values; it is the vision of a world which is strictly no 'world' but rather a moral and metaphysical chaos. The issue posed by Stirner's vision is simply this: can such a world be lived in by men who seek to remain sane without the prophylaxis of illusion—and if so, on what terms?

Stirner's contemporary, Kierkegaard, had confronted this spectacle of the ultimate nothingness of all things. 'I stick my finger into existence —it smells of nothing. Where am I? Who am I? How came I here? What is this thing called the world? What does this word mean?'[1] Kierkegaard, too, had experienced the futility and 'terrible tedium' of existence. 'My soul's poisonous doubt is all-consuming. My soul is like the dead sea, over which no bird can fly; when it has flown midway, then it sinks down to death and destruction.'[2] Writing forty years after both Stirner and Kierkegaard, that 'first perfect European nihilist', Friedrich Nietzsche, also described the spiritual vacuum at the heart of existence, and predicted the final devaluation of man and the world after the death of God. 'The categories of Purpose, Unity, Being, by means of which we had lent some worth to life,' says Nietzsche, 'we have once more divorced from it—and the world now appears worthless to us.'[3] But of course it has been with the

[1] S. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, translated by W. Lowrie, Princeton, 1941, p. 114.
[2] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, translated by D. F. and L. M. Swenson, Princeton, 1944, vol. I, p. 30.
[3] *The Living Thoughts of Nietzsche*, ed. H. Mann, London, 1939, p. 99.

rise of twentieth-century existentialism, both atheistic and Christian, that the question of man's estrangement from the world has been most widely confronted and discussed. 'The state of our whole life', says Paul Tillich, 'is estrangement from others and ourselves, because we are estranged from the Ground of our being, because we are estranged from the origin and aim of our life. . . . The abyss of separation is not always visible. But it has become more visible to our generation than to the preceding generations, because of our feeling of meaninglessness, emptiness, doubt, and cynicism—all expressions of despair, of our separation from the roots and the meaning of our life.'[1] Most of us, says Heidegger, 'shut our ears to the soundless voice which attunes us to the horrors of the abyss',[2] but in our moments of lucidity we perceive ourselves to be enveloped by nothingness as by a shroud. Existentialist man perceives everything, himself included, to be utterly gratuitous, without reason or meaning. The human mode of being, declares Sartre, is that mode of being which 'is conscious of its facticity; it has the feeling of its complete gratuitousness; it apprehends itself as being there *for nothing*, as being *de trop*'.[3] To be self-aware, according to the existentialist, is to be aware of the pointlessness of one's existence and the sheer absurdity of the world.

As a philosophy, existentialism seeks to remain true to its original vision of the meaninglessness of all things. Indeed, it insists that this recognition of the ultimate meaninglessness of existence is the one true foundation on which any form of 'authentic' living can be based. Now, when existentialists come to define their conception of 'truth', they further insist that any truth which is to be relevant to the concrete, temporal individual, caught up in his immediate existential situation, must be a truth which he is capable of appropriating in terms of his own existence; it must be a truth which he can make his own, which he can invest with the urgency of his own self-concern; it must be a 'vital' truth which he is capable of willing and *living*. An existential

[1] Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, sermon entitled 'You are Accepted'.
[2] Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?*
[3] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Two, ch. 1, sec. III.

truth is not a bald proposition to which the mind gives its purely intellectual assent: it is a total existential commitment of the whole person, for it is *within* this truth that he henceforth chooses to live his life.

However, if an existentialist—almost by definition—is someone who both upholds the idea of 'truth' as a total personal commitment and at the same time seeks to confront, with complete veracity, the ultimate nothingness of the world, then existentialists as such would seem to be trapped in an impossible situation. In the meaningless, nihilistic world to which the existentialist courageously bears testimony, it would clearly seem that no meaningful life could possibly be lived; and yet, if the existentialist conception of 'truth' as a profoundly lived commitment is to be taken literally, then it is to just such an impossibly nihilistic life that he has profoundly committed himself. The detached intellectual recognition of nihilism as the universal outcome of human endeavour, ultimately subverting all man-made security, is one thing; the resolve to found one's life on this and no other basis is quite another thing. According to Helmut Thielicke, the man whose experience is governed by nihilism as the truth in, through, and under which he must exist, has only two choices before him. 'The first possibility is that he can take his own life, and if he does so because his life is no longer worth living, he still has a conception of ultimate validities and values which can be demanded of life, even though it does not vouchsafe them. . . . The second possibility is that he goes on living; he decides to hold out. But again he does not live a radically nihilistic existence. . . . for every step he takes is fundamentally inconsistent, including the reception of food. The only way one can take a step meaningfully is to know where one is going. But for the nihilist that goal has been lost. He does something which can only be done in the name of a purpose or meaning and yet he does it without meaning.'[1] Thielicke concludes that nihilism can never exist 'in a pure state'. Nihilism is always 'fractured', existing only 'as a possibility and a threat', and the situation of the nihilist is never an 'absolute endpoint' but always only an 'interim situation', in which he is com-

[1] Thielicke, *Nihilism*, ch. XI, sec. 2.

pelled 'to go on living with the threat of the deadly abyss, to dwell on a thin crust of ice', because 'nobody yet has ever lived in the watery wastes beneath the ice'.[1]

Stirner, of course, stands as the avowed representative of the opposite claim. It is precisely such a life 'in the watery wastes beneath the ice' which he sets out to portray in the character of The Unique One. The significance of Stirner's claim, however, and its enormity, can best be seen by contrasting his adoption of nihilism as the governing truth of his experience with the attitude of the existentialists, who claim to discover the truth of nihilism in order to withstand and finally 'surmount' it. This would seem from the start to be a confession of failure—the failure to appropriate existentially the nihilistic truth of which they are intellectually convinced. However, if nihilistic truth really is incapable of being existentially appropriated, of being inwardly adopted and lived, then the existentialists' retreat from their original nihilism is apparently the only response which it is open to them to make.

'Existentialism', according to Helmut Kuhn, 'stands and falls with the idea of a passage from the negative state of anguish before Nothingness to an affirmation.' This critical passage has been described (by Simone de Beauvoir and others) as 'the existentialist conversion'. 'But', as Kuhn adds, 'the difficulty consists in imagining a position beyond the abyss of Nothingness, in immunity from the virus of nihilistic self-destruction.'[2] It is also difficult to imagine how the abyss can be crossed. 'Only one fact stands out clearly', says Kuhn. 'Whatever may follow, the sequence stands to the series of preceding steps in the negative relation of discontinuity. The movement of transition is a "leap", not a development. . . . For that reason any particular cause embraced, any objective pursued, any principle adopted in consequence of that transitional move remains unrelated to the move itself. It is something on which the chooser "hits", a ground upon which he lands after his leap in the dark.'[3] Clearly there is no common ground on which all existentialists necessarily land after their leap

[1] Thielicke, loc. cit.
[2] Kuhn, *Encounter with Nothingness*, ch. VII.
[3] Kuhn, loc. cit.

in the dark. For Kierkegaard, the leap is a 'leap of faith': the encounter with nothingness purges and ravishes the agonized soul of the solitary, despairing individual, shocking him into the critical existential decision which brings him into the presence of God and opens him to the power of divine grace. For Nietzsche, describing himself as 'the first perfect European nihilist, who, however, has already outlived nihilism in his own soul—who has outgrown, overcome, and dismissed it',[1] the leap is a leap towards a new, heroic ideal of moral culture and individual creativity, personified in the proud and joyful figure of the Superman. Sartre, after the almost unrelieved nihilism of *Being and Nothingness*, increasingly stresses 'the absolute character of the free commitment', which 'is at the very heart and centre of existentialism'[2] because it is solely by means of such commitment, conferring a meaning and a purpose on the life of the committed individual, that a breach can be made in the vicious circle of meaninglessness and futility in which he has hitherto been trapped: having initially committed himself to a kind of radical humanism, Sartre has finally embraced a dynamic and highly personal form of Marxism, in which he has presumably found the 'deliverance and salvation' which seemed so remote in *Being and Nothingness*. Even Heidegger, in some ways the most uncompromising of existential thinkers, has found it impossible to live in permanent confrontation with the nothingness which, on his own account, we exist to be. Authentic personal existence, according to *Being and Time*, consists in an active identification with its own nothingness without hope of overcoming it; it consents to exist in conscious anticipation of death as man's 'ownmost possibility';[3] it chooses to exist without roots or place in any sustaining environment, launching itself out into total insecurity and total abandonment. But apparently Heidegger, too, has found it impossible to live inside the metaphysical void, shut off from any fundamental relationship or meaningful commitment: after the dead end reached in *Being and Time* he at first clutched momentarily at National Socialism in his search for a significant and purposeful

[1] Nietzsche, op. cit., p. 93. [2] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 47.
[3] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Part One, Division Two, ch. I (sec. 53).

life-form, and the long years since then he seems to have spent as the philosophical 'shepherd of Being' who faithfully awaits the return of the once and future God throughout the period of His absence in the long night of Being.

When Sartre says that 'choice is possible, but what is not possible is not to choose',[1] he is speaking on behalf of all existentialists. Whether it is Christianity or communism, the Superman or the future God that he chooses, every existentialist is committed to choose, by an act of total self-delivery, the fundamental meaning of the world in which he henceforth undertakes to live. Qua existentialist, he is not committed to anything in particular; but qua existentialist he is committed to commitment, since it is impossible for him to establish a foundation for living in the detached, free-floating atmosphere of the nihilistic void. Moreover, qua existentialist he is committed to a new form of selfhood: every existential choice is also a choice of self. The self-choice of a Kierkegaard is of course different from the self-choice of a Nietzsche, that of a Sartre from that of a Heidegger. But in every case, when a truly existential choice has been made, the new self which arises is a characteristically deepened and strengthened self, a self which is for the first time capable of living 'authentically'. Through existential commitment a new focus for the self is gained, unifying and condensing its powers to a degree of maximum intensity. By virtue of the existentialist's resolve 'to think and will one thing', by virtue of his decision to concentrate on 'the one thing needful', he is able to recover and integrate his previously scattered powers, to mobilize and define them in service of the cause to which he has committed himself. The existentialist is able to live 'authentically' because he frankly recognizes that the cause which he has chosen 'has value only because it is chosen'; and the 'authentic' self which is formed and founded by this act of conscious choice exhibits above all the saving and crucial characteristics of dedication, resoluteness, and integrity.

In some respects, undeniably, this conception of authentic existence closely resembles Stirner's concept of egoistic 'self-

[1] Sartre, op. cit., p. 48.

possession'. Stirner's Unique One, like the existentialists' authentic individual, resolves to confront the ultimate nothingness of existence unflinchingly and without recourse to the euphemisms and illusions of his age. His self-possession also involves a kind of self-definition, an emancipation and concentration of his renewed being, which his self-possession enables him to organize and fulfil. The self-possessed individual has also recovered himself from those external powers—organized religion, social and political hegemonies, mass taste, public opinion—which forever try to divide the individual from himself, confusing or suborning him when they cannot directly coerce him. Egoistic self-possession, like existential authenticity, is essentially attained by a personal and inward act, by a transformation in my self-consciousness which brings about a crucial change in my whole mode of being. Like the authenticity of the existentialist, the self-possession of the conscious egoist arises from the individual's choice of himself as the free and self-supporting creator of the world of his choice.

But these undeniable resemblances should not mask the basic repugnance between the two concepts. Existential authenticity is accompanied by a deep personal tension and a passionate sense of urgency which are quite foreign to the relaxed and impassive being of the self-possessed egoist. Dispassionate, imperturbable, Stirner's egoist makes his decisive self-choice coolly and unsensationally. The self which he chooses does not embody 'the absolute of concentration' which, according to H. J. Blackham, is the choice of the existentialist,[1] for unlike the existentialist's authentic individual the self-possessed egoist does not seek to unify and integrate his diffuse interests into a meaningful, resolute, and purposive whole. The self-possessed egoist certainly concentrates upon himself and his own interests exclusively; his self-awareness is an awareness of himself as a distinct—indeed as the unique—focus for all his activities and endeavours: but the self on which all his attention centres is far from being the coherent and integrated self of the existentialist's authentic individual, with his rooted, stable, indivisible concerns. Far from settling his interests on a single, fixed, and final object, the nihilistic egoist preserves

[1] Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers*, ch. I, sec. I.

himself and his interests in a constant state of flux and dissolution, perpetually reviewing and modifying the heterogeneous objectives which he provisionally sets himself. A fine equilibrium is indeed preserved among his multiple interests and activities; but no single or continuous pattern illustrates this equilibrium, no consistent purpose unifies these interests and activities. Thus the nihilistic egoist does not recognize an ideal integrity of character—the personal integrity achieved by the authentic individual of the existentialists—to be a kind of saving grace vouchsafed to the man who remains true to himself and his situation. The true nihilist does not want to be 'saved', and—for the nihilistic egoist—to covet such a grace would in any case be to forfeit one's self-possession, by admitting a transcendent standard, almost a moral standard, in terms of which one's life and personality were to be judged. Certainly when Sartre, for example, describes those who hide themselves from their true situation as 'cowards' and 'scum',[1] he seems to be applying a standard of objective moral judgment of the very kind which he not only declares to be impossible but which, he also declares, must be frankly recognized to be impossible if we are to begin to live authentically. If existential authenticity means, among other things, the frank recognition that there are no objective and given standards in terms of which our lives can be judged, then the authentic individual is hardly entitled to pass judgment on those who do not make this frank recognition and, like him, found their lives upon it. Nor is he entitled to pass judgment on those who, like Stirner's self-possessed egoist, repudiating the ideal of existential integrity, freely choose to dissipate and consume their amorphous and mutable being, and to lead their capricious, transient lives as a promiscuous series of unrelated adventures, without consistency of purpose or unity of aspiration.

Stirner would reject the existentialist concept of authenticity, then, both because he rejects the ideas of personal integrity and dedication of purpose which are contained in this concept and because in practice the concept of authenticity tends to be used by existentialists, illicitly, as precisely the kind of moral standard or

[1] Sartre, op. cit., p. 52.

personal ideal which habitually excites Stirner's most vigorous loathing. Moreover, as we have seen, existential authenticity is supposed to be gained by an act of free and total self-choice on the part of the individual existentialist, who in the moment of self-choice apprehends himself as totally free to choose, by an act of conscious commitment, the world in which he will henceforth live. The world to which he commits himself perpetually mirrors this original self-choice, and it is in and by his act of commitment that the contours of a meaningful world for the first time emerge. Now, if Stirner would repudiate the concept of existential authenticity, he would repudiate this concept of a total and binding personal 'commitment' even more emphatically. To the self-possessed egoist the idea of unconditional self-commitment, of advancing single-mindedly and unambiguously into an existential posture which one resolves henceforth to affirm absolutely and in all circumstances, is intrinsically and in general repugnant. Undoubtedly, it is from the self-choice of The Unique One, according to Stirner, that the profile of his personal world emerges: but The Unique One is not 'committed' to his world in the solemn and binding sense of existential commitment; rootless, chameleon-like, he refuses to adopt a single or final posture from which to affirm himself, and the self which he affirms is as ambiguous and unstable as the world to which it gives momentary identity. Unlike the existentialist, The Unique One is not committed to preserve the distinctive meaningfulness of his personal world by a constant and resolute act of choice, since the world which he has chosen is in truth a world which is distinctively meaningless, a world which reflects the chosen meaninglessness of his own person, a world which he perpetually 'dissolves' and 'consumes' as he dissolves and consumes himself. A world to whose settled meaning he had committed himself would be a world to which he had alienated himself. His self-possession would be at an end, for the world which he had begun by possessing would at last have come to possess him.

Thus the nihilistic egoist will reject the concept of existential commitment, since in his eyes such commitment must spell an ultimate and total self-loss. In addition, and for the same reason,

he would reject each and all of the specific forms of commitment into which actual existentialists have in fact entered. It goes without saying that Kierkegaard's Christian commitment, his freely chosen mortification and inward martyrdom to the faith which he has grasped and means passionately to live, would be—like all other forms of self-sacrifice—wholly odious to the detached and self-possessed egoist. The posture of the Nietzschean Superman would in many respects be hardly less odious. The nihilistic egoist will not endorse the new moral values—nobility, reason, courage, cruelty, and so on—by which Nietzsche proposes to replace the decadent Christian and humanistic cultures, because as *moral* values they would be just as inimical and oppressive to the phlegmatic, self-satisfied egoist as were the old. Whereas Nietzsche's superb new ideal of moral culture and personal perfection can only be realised by men who are willing to overcome their narrow, limited, ordinary selves, the nihilistic egoist, never judging himself but judging everything else in relation to himself, is always wholly satisfied with himself as he is and has no intention of sacrificing his real and present enjoyment in favour of an ideal and future perfection to which he feels no commitment whatsoever.

If, to the nihilistic egoist, the Christian commitment of Kierkegaard would seem to place the individual in alienation to a jealous God and the cultural commitment of Nietzsche would seem to place him in alienation to a spurious ideal of moral perfection, the humanitarian and socialist commitments of Sartre would seem to place him in alienation to that emergent form of human community which, in the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre calls 'the Group'. To the idea of 'the Group' as a genuine, self-conscious community of ends, in which every man identifies his own needs in the needs of his neighbour, thus forming a kind of 'general individual' or 'general will' to which individuals are bound by the artificial necessity of 'the oath', the nihilistic egoist will make all the objections which Stirner made to the similar ideas of Feuerbach and Hegel: Sartre's form of commitment is essentially a commitment to surrender himself; the choice which he makes in his capacity as a free individual is essentially the choice to surrender his free individuality. The only

group which the egoist will join is a group which he can manipulate or exploit. The egoist will not *commit* himself to any group, for although he may have to profess loyalty to it he will certainly feel none, and he will calmly abandon it as soon as it ceases to serve his purposes. A group to which I had bound myself existentially would be a group in which I survived only as a shadow of my former self.

Of all the existentialists, it is Heidegger who most nearly avoids every form of commitment. In *Being and Time* the authentic life is equated with the life of disengagement, the life of the clear-sighted individual who refuses to identify himself with any of the meaningless activities by which he is surrounded and in which, to some extent, he is obliged to participate. Even in *Being and Time*, however, there are many features which would excite the disfavour of the nihilistic egoist: the highly tendentious terminology in which Heidegger describes the transition from our worthless everydaypreoccupations(into which we are said to have 'fallen') to the lofty detachment of authentic existence (to which we are said to be 'called' by what Heidegger calls 'Conscience'); Heidegger's insistence on being-with-others as a primordial structure of human existence, and his insistence that my relationship to others must always be qualitatively distinguished from my relationships to things; above all, perhaps, Heidegger's conception of an authentic being-with-others—liberating others and helping them to become their true selves—as an integral element in any form of authentic existence to which the individual may truly aspire. But the demanding and momentous existential role, even if it is not exactly a form of 'commitment,' which Heidegger has laboured to create for himself in the long years of his philosophical pilgrimage since *Being and Time*, would be still more repugnant to the nihilistic egoist. The role of the philosopher during the present dark night of Being, this 'time of need' after the death of God and the destruction of traditional metaphysics, according to Heidegger, is to act as the guardian or 'shepherd of Being'. By purifying himself from worldly concerns and keeping himself open to 'the quiet voice of Being', the philosopher should seek to make the dimension of 'the Holy' once more present to the world,

to bear inward witness, in 'obedience' and 'sacrifice', to the 'mystery' and 'grace' of Being throughout the long crisis of its eclipse.[1] It would appear that Heidegger's nihilism, which was in any case never more than a partial and reluctant nihilism, has finally degenerated into an almost religious mysticism, in whose cult the philosopher is called to perform an almost sacramental office. To the nihilistic egoist, who 'has no vocation and follows none' and who is the most relentless enemy of 'the holy', this assumption by the philosopher of an almost hieratic vocation would seem clearly to mark the final extreme of self-deception and self-betrayal.

As a nihilistic egoist, then, Stirner would vehemently condemn each and all of the specific forms of commitment into which actual existentialists have historically entered, since all of them, in their different ways, involve an ultimate self-renunciation on the part of the egoist, an ultimate surrender of his egoistic self-sufficiency and self-possession. It is easy to imagine the characteristic criticisms which Stirner would direct against the specific commitments of a Marcel, a Berdyaev, or a Jaspers, and we have already seen something of the criticisms he would be likely to direct against the Christian commitments of a Buber, a Tillich, and a Bultmann. But of course, quite apart from these specific criticisms of particular forms of commitment, it is really the very concept of existential 'commitment' which, as such, is from the outset unacceptable to the nihilistic egoist. The concept of existential commitment as the solemn and binding choice of a distinctive existential posture would be unacceptable to Stirner in his capacity as the self-chosen egoist, for Stirner's egoist is always the elusive and protean Unique One, who refuses to be bound by the past or to bind himself for the future; and the concept of existential commitment as the crucial and saving existential response, whereby the solitary individual providentially confers significance and value upon the apparently meaningless and purposeless world in which he finds himself shipwrecked, would

[1] See, among Heidegger's later writings, esp. the postscript to *What is Metaphysics?*, *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*, the *Letter on Humanism*, and the collection of essays entitled *Forest Paths*.

be unacceptable to Stirner in his capacity as the self-consistent nihilist, who affirms the truth of nihilism, not as a predicament to be ingeniously evaded or heroically surmounted, but as a condition to be realistically willed and lived.

To the truly self-consistent nihilist this is existentialism's real point of failure. On the one hand, the existentialist seeks to remain true to his original vision of the meaninglessness and futility of everything, since this fundamental cosmic honesty must be the basis of any attempt to live authentically; on the other hand, his stark personal reality is that he finds himself *unable* to appropriate the truth of nihilism existentially, unable to affirm it as his personal truth, the truth within which he will henceforth live: and it is at this point that he clutches at the artifice of commitment, hoping to save himself from nihilistic despair by a desperate leap towards a faith that will restore meaning and purpose to his shattered world. 'For logical thought', says Kuhn, 'the dilemma created by the existentialist "leap" is inescapable. Every attempted escape becomes an escape from existentialism itself. As a matter of fact these escapes abound. It is one of the characteristics of existentialism that its adherents are continually on the verge of apostasy.'[1] If an existentialist is a man who seeks to experience the encounter with nothingness inwardly and in his whole person, not merely as a general truth to be abstractly contemplated but as an intensely personal truth to be existentially appropriated and lived, then the refusal to make the truth of nihilism one's own and build one's life entirely within its shadow is indeed a refusal of existentialism itself. The existentialist cannot find salvation in a significant, purposeful faith without ceasing to be an existentialist. So long as he remains true to his existentialist insights, he imprisons himself, as Blackham says of Nietzsche, 'within the chalked circle of his own metaphysical assumptions'.[2] If, like Nietzsche, he is determined not to retract his original nihilistic vision, then he finds himself in an impasse from which there is no escape, he finds that the nihilistic truth which he has chosen to confront is a truth which cannot be authentically overcome, although, like Nietzsche, he may continually tty to

[1] Kuhn, op. cit., ch. IX.

[2] Blackham, op. cit., ch. II, sec. IV.

evade this grim conclusion. In Nietzsche's case, according to Blackham, there was 'no means of getting out of the nihilism into which he plunged himself, precisely because it was a deliberate plunge over the edge'. Blackham continues: 'He tried to say at the same time: nihilism must be surmounted; nihilism cannot be surmounted. . . . One can look down into the bottom of an abyss refusing the possibility of throwing oneself over the edge, but one cannot explore the possibility by a tentative jump. One can examine in thought the possibility of nihilism (as an irresolvable conflict between human valuations and cosmic facts) and try to show that it is not the truth; but if one is determined to will and to live the possibility of nihilism, then one no longer has any independent standpoint under one's feet; worse than Kierkegaard "out upon the seventy thousand fathoms of water", one is actually sucked down and engulfed.'[1]

Existentialists have rightly been regarded with suspicion by more orthodox adherents of the faiths to which they have committed themselves. The orthodox Christian, the truly dedicated Marxist, can scarcely be expected to welcome a convert whose zeal is perpetually tempered by an inner declaration of his own ultimate solitude and freedom, who at every moment affirms that the faith of his choice 'has value only because it is chosen'. The existentialist may conscientiously resolve to live the life of a devout Christian or militant communist, but as an 'existential' Christian or communist he is bound to remain continuously aware of the ultimate absurdity of his choice, which remains utterly irrational and without objective justification. His impersonation of a true believer may be very convincing, but at bottom he must always remain a heretic of the most dangerous kind, since the fatal clarity of his original existential insight requires him to deny—at every instant and in the very act of 'believing'—the objective truth and significance of the faith to which he professes commitment. Human experience, as the existentialist originally and finally apprehends it, evinces an absolute failure of meaning; and thus, when he comes to commit himself to his chosen cause, according to Simone de Beauvoir, the

[1] Loc. cit.

existentialist 'prevents every possibility of failure by refusing to posit as absolutes those ends to which my transcendence launches itself'.[1] On this characteristic statement Kuhn comments: 'A new paradox: the same philosophy which writes "decision and commitment" on its banner recommends noncommitment as an insurance against failure. But is this not tantamount to advocating a Philosophy of Disloyalty?'[2]

This, then, is the final irony of the dilemma in which the existentialist finds himself trapped. He cannot liberate himself from his original vision of the total meaninglessness of existence, for it is on his courageous acceptance of ultimate meaninglessness that his existential veracity and integrity should be founded; nor can he steel himself to enter and make his abode in the nihilistic void which has opened up beneath his feet, converting his anguished recognition of cosmic meaninglessness into a genuinely existential choice of meaninglessness as the personal truth which he resolves to live and will, since he continues to recoil from the nothingness which he forces himself to confront; and thus he vainly strives to 'overcome' the nihilistic truth by which his situation is necessarily defined, hopelessly seeking refuge in Gods whom he is doomed to depose or simulating commitment to causes which he knows to be illusory. It is in this sense that existentialism is a 'philosophy of disloyalty'. Either the existentialist is at the last moment disloyal to the nihilistic truth which he originally resolved to accept and make his own, or—in his essential disenchantment—he is bound to be systematically disloyal to the already broken cause to which he professes commitment. The circle of disenchantment cannot be breached from within: the man who escapes by a 'leap' of faith does so at the cost of denying the nihilistic experience which made his leap necessary.

Thus it would seem that the critics of existentialism are right when they aver that no meaningful life can be founded on a conviction of the ultimacy of meaninglessness. This is the stern

[1] S. de Beauvoir, 'Pour une morale de l'ambiguité', in *Les Temps Modernes*, II, p. 197.

[2] Kuhn, loc. cit.

conclusion which the existentialist flees but which he cannot escape. But of course this is precisely the conclusion in which the nihilistic egoist not only acquiesces, readily and with composure, but which he specifically and explicitly affirms, in a deliberate act of self-identification. Genuine commitment is indeed impossible to the man who lives in a metaphysical and moral vacuum. And it is in just such a vacuum that the nihilistic egoist has consciously and voluntarily taken up his abode. It is in the dimension of meaninglessness that he lives and moves and has his being. In this sense the nihilistic egoist may be said to be the one who recovers and bears witness to the original truth of existentialism from which existentialists themselves 'are constantly on the verge of apostasy', for a self-consistent existentialism, it transpires, must end where it claimed to begin, in the wholly personal, inward, and fearless appropriation of the nihilistic truth by which the individual's experience is governed and within which he resolutely chooses to live. The existentialist is defined by his commitment to this truth, which renders all other commitments impossible; although actual existentialists, in their desperate search for meaningful commitments, have in fact refused this original commitment to meaninglessness, and it has in fact been left to the nihilist to preserve the nihilistic truth which is at the heart of existentialism. Unlike the existentialists, the nihilist does not conceal from himself that his original 'commitment' is and must be a commitment to noncommitment. As Thielicke (who clearly perceives the inherently nihilistic character of existentialism) correctly observes: 'Nihilism always originates in the spectator situation. This becomes clear in the most important special instance of spectatorship, which is relativism. The moment I become a spectator and detach myself from life, looking at it as a kind of panorama that lies below me, all absolute values become confused and are sucked into the engulfing stream of events. Nothing transcends the stream as an "unconditioned" norm, an "eternal" value. . . Nihilism always consists in a . . . detached relation to things and people'.[1] Solitude, self-possession, passionless de-

[1] Thielicke, loc. cit.

tachment: this is the existential posture of the nihilist, and this is the only posture possible for the existentialist who is determined to remain truly an existentialist. The nihilist does not, as Thielicke elsewhere suggests, experience 'a passion for nothingness'.[1] He calmly severs himself from things and people and, unappalled, moves into the void which he has himself become.

Like the existentialists, Stirner starts from the nihilistic premise. Meaninglessness, the essential nullity of everything, is for Stirner the governing and universal phenomenon, the key feature of the individual's experience, draining it of all significance and value. To exist is to live—not under the reign of God, or of law, or of humanity—but under the reign of nothingness. 'All things are nothing to me!' says Stirner, in the primordial accents of the nihilist. Unlike the existentialists, however, Stirner moves from his nihilistic premise to an equally nihilistic dénouement. The existence into which he finally projects himself remains the Godless, lawless, inhuman existence of his original instinct. Meaninglessness, for Stirner, is not just an objective feature of experienced reality which the nihilist simply discovers and passively records: meaninglessness is the household demon which he himself unleashes, it is his personal mark which he deliberately stamps upon his experience, it is a governing and universal phenomenon which he has freely chosen and wholly wills; and thus the metaphysical desert which he inhabits is ultimately a desert of his own creation; in looking into the abyss he is ultimately looking into himself.

Unlike the existentialists, Stirner carries out his resolve to live in, through, and under the truth of nihilism. He does not choose the first of the two possibilities which, according to Thielicke, are the only ones facing the self-consistent nihilist. He does not 'take his own life'. There is indeed a sense in which he commits moral or spiritual suicide; there is a sense in which the nihilist is already dead, although—like Branca d'Oria—he ostensibly continues to move and act in the daily world of men.[2] But he does not literally put an end to his conscious existence: 'he decides to hold out'. What this means, as Thielicke correctly observes, is that he is

[1] Thielicke, op. cit., ch. I.

[2] See Dante, *Inferno*, canto XXXIII.

committed to 'a life of permanent inconsequence'.[1] He resolves to live, in the knowledge that life entails acting and choosing, although there are no meaningful acts or choices which he can undertake. Thielicke, indeed, fallaciously assumes that either the nihilist who 'holds out' is doomed to live like a vegetable, perhaps losing his will and identity in the supine anonymity of the mass, perhaps retreating, like Cratylus, into a mute and motionless solipsism; or he must resolve to act and choose as an existing individual, in which case, with 'every step he takes', he publishes his abandonment of the 'radically nihilistic existence'. But there is another possibility, which involves no such self-surrender or self-deception, and in term of which Stirner is able to resolve the false dilemma. Stirner's nihilism is not the suppressed, unconscious nihilism of the man whom despair has made oblivious to everything, even to his own freedom and uniqueness; it is not the incomplete, apprehensive, and finally abrogated nihilism of the man whose brief traumatic encounter with nothingness shocks him into a glad return to the illusory meanings of the everday world, embracing any cause that will erase the memory of his terrible experience: Stirner's nihilism is impenitent and complete because it is the conscious, deliberate nihilism of the nihilistic egoist.

Now, nihilism is obliteration of the world as a meaningful unity. To dissolve the Christian 'world', or the worlds of idealism or humanism, is not to perform the nihilistic act if the destruction of these worlds is immediately followed (as in the classic existentialist 'conversion') by an act of cosmic restitution, re-forming the instantaneous chaos in order to found a new, personal, and living universe of generally valid meanings. If Stirner had merely replaced the Christian, idealistic, and other worlds by a metaphysical world of his own, governed as they had been by a uniform directing principle (in this case the governing principle of universal egoism), then his nihilism, like that of the existentialists, would indeed have been an 'interim' or 'fractured' nihilism. In a superficial view it might seem as if this was in fact precisely what he did do, for he undoubtedly believed himself to have destroyed all former worlds and he undoubtedly sought to describe and inhabit a

[1] Thielicke, op. cit., ch. XI, sec. 2.

world of his own creation. In the ashes of the old worlds he sought to establish his own world, the world of the egoist, and it is around the central figure of the self-conscious egoist, The Unique One, that his world is from the start formed and defined. But to conclude that Stirner's instantaneous creation of this egoistic world amounted to an abandonment, perhaps an inevitable abandonment, of his original nihilistic project, would be to overlook the profoundly ambiguous character of Stirner's act of metaphysical 'creation' and the equally ambiguous character of the egoistic 'world' to which it gives rise. The world of The Unique One is indeed a 'world' in the sense that the crass elements of his immediate experience are organized and totalized around the person of The Unique One himself as their centre and foundation. But this totalization does not create a 'world' in the sense of a secure cosmic framework guaranteeing the actions and purposes of its inhabitants and investing them with a stable significance; The Unique One does not create a 'world' in the sense of a theatre furnishing permanent accommodation to actors who can keep and polish the roles they are given in it. The framework erected by The Unique One has beenerected only that it may be immediately dismantled; the theatre is continually being opened only that its proprietor may continually exercise his power of closing it. The world created by Stirner is a world that is instantaneously destroyed, and, moreover, a world that has been 'created' only that it may be instantaneously destroyed. Taking its character from its creator, the 'creative nothingness', it becomes, only that it may become a nothingness. Unified by the self-cancelling act of its creator, its unity is a perpetually vanishing unity. The world of The Unique One, indeed, is not so much a world as an anti-world.

The world of The Unique One takes its character from its proprietor and creator. Thus it is the world of an egoist, but of an egoist who has chosen himself as a man without character. Stirner's egoism never ceases to be a *nihilistic* egoism, refusing final and complete solutions and inscribing on each unrelated project the mark of its inner purposelessness and insignificance. The Unique One's act of metaphysical creation is not intended to transform an objective chaos into an ordered pattern of experience

charged with subjective but systematic meaning. The world which emerges from his creative act is a world which reflects and carries forward the disintegration and meaninglessness of the original chaos, because it realizes and symbolizes the disintegration and meaninglessness of the person who is its capricious author and its perpetuallyabscondiug proprietor. The Unique One, who is the ground and origin of his private metaphysical universe, in which all things are rooted and to which they return, is himself a nothingness, and his world is thus a world which is literally sustained and directed by nothing. The Unique One posits himself as the vacuum at the centre of existence, consuming all things, degrading all things, stultifying all things, destroying all things. The world which he creates is thus a living facsimile of the abyss in which it has been gestated, and his choice of his world (unlike the world-choice of the existentialists) is thus not an escape from nothingness but a re-affirmation, indeed a re-creation, of the original nothingness which he began by acknowledging.

In his portrait of The Unique One Stirner is in effect portraying the 'radically nihilistic existence', arguing its credibility, and demonstrating its implications. It is a portrait of deliberate and controlled disintegration. It is the portrait of a cynical, sophisticated, and rootless opportunist, ambiguous and evasive in his refusal to define or commit himself, deviously artificial in his avoidance of private obligation or public role. The Unique One is a portrait of refined incoherence, studied irresponsibility, accomplished purposelessness. He personifies the motiveless, the arbitrary, the gratuitous. If Stirner's portrait of The Unique One is a documentary guide to the exploitation and abuse of others, it is also a study in the artistry of self-abuse, for The Unique One's enjoyment and consumption of the world is at the same time a consumption and dissolution of himself: his self-creation is an incessant self-destruction. It is quite true that Stirner sometimes speaks of The Unique One—understood as the concrete, sensuous individual who 'takes pleasure in himself as a living flesh-and-blood person'[1] in contrast with the grey, spectral figments, 'God', 'Man', and so on, of metaphysics and theology—as if he were the

[1] D.E., p. 21.

one dependable reality, rooted in objective, natural, physical fact, and so immune from the destructive analysis which he practises against all things else. His phenomenological descriptions of the being of The Unique One, however, are manifestly not descriptions of any such fixed and stable reality: they are descriptions of a being in constant flux and dissolution. The existence of The Unique One would not be a radically nihilistic existence if, having set out to destroy *all* principles, it presupposed itself as the one static and given principle. 'If the presuppositions which have hitherto been current are to melt away in a full dissolution,' says Stirner, 'they must not be dissolved into a higher presupposition again.'[1] Stirner freely acknowledges that '*I* start by presupposing *myself*'; however, he adds, 'I immediately consume my presupposition and exist only in consuming it. But that presupposition is therefore not a presupposition at all; for as The Unique One I repudiate the dualism of a presupposing and a presupposed self. . . That I consume myself simply means that I exist. I do not presuppose myself; rather, I *posit* or *create* myself, existing only in the act of positing myself moment-by-moment, as creator and creature in one.'[2]

It is quite true that Stirner sometimes speaks of 'setting up the principle of egoism',[3] as if the egoist himself were the ultimate and unyielding principle, sanctified against all fortuities, above, beyond, and exempt from the general flux. Stirner himself, however, explicitly repudiates this interpretation:[4] his egoism is a nihilistic egoism, before which nothing—not even the person of the egoist, The Unique One himself—is sacred. 'The Unique One', says Stirner, 'is an expression of which it can be said with all honesty and candour that it expresses—Nothing',[5] and his phenomenological descriptions of the being of The Unique One are indeed descriptions of a being who is constantly returning to the Nothingness which he originally and ultimately is. For The Unique

[1] D.E., pp. 178–9. [2] D.E., p. 178.

[3] See *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, p. 412.

[4] See op. cit., pp. 365–6, where Stirner explicitly declares that the egoist's 'self-interest' (unlike the interests of Reason or Humanity) is not a 'principle'.

[5] Op. cit., p. 347.

One nothing is easier than to take all things 'back into their Nothingness—that is, into me, the creator', lest 'I should fall prey to the *principle of stability*, the proper life-principle of religion, which concerns itself with creating "inviolable sanctuaries" '.[1] Everything that causes me to be 'hindered in my flow and dissolution' exemplifies that 'wretched *stability*' which The Unique One conspires with circumstances to elude.[2] No longer 'tied to the past hour', The Unique One transforms and surpasses himself every instant, sloughing his old self and projecting himself into 'the fresh future minute which beckons you across every minute of your existence'.[3] He is 'this transitory, mortal creator, who lives by consuming himself'[4] and who continuously suspends and devalues each of his fugitive interests by 'continuously taking it back into himself, annihilating its every movement towards independence, and swallowing it before it can crystallize itself into any kind of established principle'.[5] Refusing to identify himself with any of the provisional objects of his arbitrary choice, towards each of which—even while pursuing it with the utmost ruthlessness or enjoying it with the utmost complacency—he remains 'icily cold, unbelieving, and its most irreconcilable enemy', never validating or certifying it but 'leaving it always in question',[6] he will never 'abandon all power of dissolution', since for the nihilistic egoist 'to be unable to dissolve himself' would be 'to surrender himself',[7] to surrender the only identity he has, rooted in and returning to Nothingness. The nihilistic egoist, unlike the existentialists, does not flee from Nothingness into a world which will furnish him with certainties of his own creation to replace the old certainties which, in his disillusion, are lost to him forever. 'I do not love the world, for I *annihilate* it, as I annihilate myself: I *dissolve* it'.[8] Unlike the existentialists, he does not seek to 'surmount' nihilism by *re-founding* the world, since the cause to which the nihilistic egoist 'commits' himself and which serves as the 'foundation' of his personal universe—that is, himself, in all his gratuitous, fickle transiency—is really an absence of foundation: since he is himself a nothingness, the 'creative

[1] D.E., p. 395. [2] D.E., p. 229. [3] D.E., p. 48. [4] D.E., p. 429.
[5] D.E., p. 168. [6] D.E., p. 75. [7] See D.E., p. 340. [8] D.E., p. 346.

nothingness' who 'has made Nothing his cause',[1] his universe can truly be said to be founded in the void.

Rootless, vagrant, detached; frivolous, unstable, irresponsible; squandering his fluid and transient being in a consciously promiscuous career of deliberately gratuitous acts of repudiation: in the solitary and arbitrary figure of The Unique One is personified everything that is negative and destructive. On the grim, predatory features of the ruthless egoist Stirner has etched the hollow, dissipated features of the uncaring nihilist. Stirner's portrait of the nihilist, however, is not merely a vivid literary description of an imaginary personality or an imaginary life-style. If it were merely this, it would still be an arresting and memorable portrait, but it would be of interest chiefly to the analytic psychologist or the imaginative artist. Stirner's portrait of The Unique One is above all intended to express, in existential terms, those metaphysical truths about the self and the world which it is Stirner's purpose to proclaim. The figure of The Unique One shows forth what those truths mean in terms of individual existence and personal response; he shows forth the truth about his situation by the ways in which he chooses to comport himself towards it. And the truth of this situation is that nothing has meaning or value, not even the person of the nihilistic egoist who proclaims it.

In the figure of The Unique One Stirner is depicting the only way in which the truth of nihilism can be existentially affirmed, the only way in which it can be wholly willed and *lived* and so become a genuinely existential truth. The 'uniqueness' of The Unique One—the uniqueness revealed in and by his self-chosen, utter solitude—is thus not merely a truth about The Unique One himself: it symbolizes and proclaims the fundamental truth about his nihilistic world, which is a world devoid of general standards or any common and constant purposes, a world closed to univeral meanings, a world which is therefore without coherence of structure or uniformity of character. The cynical arbitrariness of The Unique One—the cynicism revealed in his chosen career of ceaseless self-dissolution, the arbitrariness revealed in all his undertakings, born in tedium and executed in indifference—

[1] See D.E., pp. 12 and 14.

illustrates and emphasizes the conscious *artificiality* of the nihilist's world, an artificiality in the light of which the specific, local, ephemeral values pragmatically generated in such a world are immediately stamped as utterly valueless, even in the moment of their adoption. The nihilist's world is consciously artificial in the sense that its totalization of meaninglessness is symbolically distinct from, because it lies beyond, that original untotalized mass of brute meaningless experience out of which the existentialists, by a subjective act of 'conversion', seek to create a unified and artificially meaningful world. (This creation of a personally meaningful world out of the original metaphysical chaos, as we have seen, marks the point at which the existentialists apostatize from their original resolution to appropriate the truth of nihilism existentially by living wholly within its shadow.) The meaninglessness of the nihilist's world is a meaninglessness which he has deliberately *reproduced*: it is a meaninglessness which he has not merely inherited, but fabricated, which he has freely chosen and consciously willed. And the metaphysical disorder of the nihilist's world is of course mirrored and embodied in the personal disorder of The Unique One himself, which is also an artificial and completely deliberate disorder. This immediate and symbolic transition, from the original, natural, untotalized meaninglessness into the ultimate, artificial totalization of meaninglessness which is the nihilist's chosen world, is the nihilistic equivalent of the existentialist 'leap' or 'conversion', and like the existentialist 'leap' it is 'not a development' but a sequence which 'stands to the series of preceding steps in the negative relation of discontinuity', so that 'any particular cause embraced. . . in consequence of that transitional move remains unrelated to the move itself'.[1] And of course the logical discontinuity of the nihilist's transition from Nothingness to Nothingness, its sheer gratuitousness, is again reflected in the nihilistic personality of The Unique One, in his desultoriness and motivelessness, in his severance from others and the world, and in his chosen mode of being as a kind of living rupture in the world, down which it perpetually vanishes to be 'swallowed' and 'consumed'. If the world of The Unique One is

[1] See Kuhn, op. cit., ch. VII.

a world which he perpetually creates, it is also a world which he perpetually disowns.

Clearly, in his portrait of The Unique One Stirner is attempting to depict, in existential terms, the outcome of a truly self-consistent nihilism. The existentialists themselves have been accused of failing to carry out their original resolve to appropriate the truth of nihilism existentially, for if they succeed in their endeavours to create, by their own unaided artifice, a personal universe charged with subjective but systematic meaning, then they have ended up by denying the ultimacy of that experience of meaninglessness which they began by affirming. To affirm this experience existentially would involve accepting the ultimacy of meaninglessness and making it one's own, resolving to live within the omnipresence of meaninglessness as the governing truth and permanent horizon of one's existence; it would involve the destruction of every semblance of purposiveness or coherence in one's personal life: it would involve a total and unflinching commitment to the 'radically nihilistic existence' which Thielicke and others have declared to be impossible but of which the figure of The Unique One furnishes all too convincing a portrayal. Reflecting, in his profound inward calm, in his utter refusal to be moved, the profundity of the void which is at the still centre of his personal universe, The Unique One sets out to be the living embodiment of that nihilistic truth from which the existentialists at last recoil.

Unlike the existentialists, who seek to create a personal universe in order to 'surmount' the Nothingness which is at the heart of existence, The Unique One creates his personal universe by reproducing the Nothingness of existence, which he therefore begins and ends by affirming. Positing himself as the centre of his world, which he has created in order to annihilate it, The Unique One preserves his life in order to squander it. Preserving himself, therefore, so that he may continuously bear about in his own person the mortality of his world, his chosen career exemplifies and fulfils that 'radically nihilistic existence' without which the truth of nihilism could not be existentially disclosed. The egoistic identity which he so studiously preserves is as self-consciously

artificial—as devoid of objective reality and inherent value—as the world which it mirrors and proclaims. Thus, if the possibility of a 'radically nihilistic existence' is questioned, by Thiele and others, Stirner presents the figure of The Unique One as documentary evidence of what such an existence would be like. Because he is prepared inwardly to adopt and to *live* the meaninglessness of his situation, the figure of The Unique One recovers and bears witness to the fundamental truth which the existentialists have recognized but which they themselves have failed to appropriate existentially. Nihilism has become his personal truth, in, through, and under which he chooses to exist, and in making this unique and final choice The Unique One is simply carrying through to its inescapable conclusion the project which lies at the heart of existentialism itself. To will and live the truth of nihilism is, then—if the figure of The Unique One is existentially credible—a possible choice, and perhaps the only one open to the self-consistent existentialist. To consummate the original truth of existentialism, it may well seem, is to recognize oneself as a nihilistic egoist.

CHAPTER XI

THE EGOIST

Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum is arguably the most complete and uncompromising of all nihilist manifestos. Seldom if ever have the world-view of nihilism and the existential posture of the nihilistic individual been depicted in such convincing detail and with such disturbing candour. If Stirner's book is one of the most radical and credible documentations of nihilism, however, it also (and in its author's intentions, primarily) sets out to be the definitive statement of another, logically distinct, philosophical perspective—the moral perspective of calculating, self-conscious egoism. Indeed, it is as the brutally frank exponent of the most extreme form of ruthless egoism that Stirner has been best known to students of the history of ethics. Now, it is by no means the case that a philosopher who expounds and defends egoism as a valid moral solution is thereby committed to an affirmation of nihilism as the supreme metaphysical truth in terms of which his moral situation is ultimately defined; and it is perhaps not the case that a philosopher who resolves to affirm the truth of nihilism is thereby committed to expressing his resolve within the moral categories of egoism: in this sense nihilism and egoism are certainly logically distinct. The fact remains that Stirner's own characteristic affirmation of nihilism is deliberately, pointedly cast in the idiom of egoism and delivered from the standpoint of the egoist, while the wholly distinctive form of egoism expounded by Stirner is accordingly suffused through and through with the nihilistic purpose of which it is the vehicle. In the figure of The Unique One the gratuitousness of the nihilist is given form and objectivity as the exploitiveness of the egoist. Logically distinct as these two elements may be in themselves, in Stirner's portrait of The Unique One they are inseparably complementary; indeed The Unique One shows forth their fusion as a kind of inner necessity, whereby

the destructiveness of the nihilist consummates itself in the creativity of the egoist. It is in and through his egoism that the nihilism of The Unique One is reproduced and rendered fluent in the world. It is as the self-chosen, self-consuming egoist that he wills and lives the radically nihilistic existence of his original choice.

The figure of The Unique One sets out to embody conscious egoism carried to its logical extreme. In addition to furnishing abundant and detailed phenomenological descriptions of the concrete attitudes and policies of the practising egoist, Stirner's portrait may be said to illustrate three main and recurring themes. Firstly, it depicts the metaphysical solitude of the total egoist, his utter detachment from others in the self-sufficiency of his enclosed and reticent being. Secondly, it illustrates the specifically ethical posture of the egoist, his deportment towards those others whose claims he begins by repudiating, and his rejection of every moral and social absolute that seeks to establish its alien authority over his person, aims, or conduct. Lastly, Stirner's portrait of The Unique One describes the egoist's fundamental existential project, his modes of subjugating and appropriating those contingent, transient objects which he arbitrarily chooses as the materials of his self-enjoyment, and his ceaseless creation of his own identity as the self-possessed proprietor who, in his infrangible self-possession, forever places himself above and beyond the aggregate of the property which he momentarily consents to be.

The figure of The Unique One is first of all the picture of an individual whose metaphysical solitude is absolute. This is surely what the very phrase, 'The Unique One', is above all intended to convey. 'Let us not aspire to community,' says Stirner, 'but to *one-sidedness*.'[1] Far from seeking to establish close and meaningful relationships with others, the true egoist consciously cherishes his remoteness from others, his 'exclusiveness', and is constantly vigilant to safeguard it. 'Egoism in its simplest and therefore hardest form' is egoism 'in the form of uniqueness, exclusiveness, itself', and Stirner goes on to ask, 'How can you be truly unique

[1] D.E., p. 364.

as long as even one connection still exists between you?'[1] To be an egoist is to disencumber oneself of all relationships, as bonds which will strangle the free individual and will at last threaten his very identity: 'If you are connected, you cannot leave each other; if a "tie" clasps you, you are something only *along with another*'.[2] This does not mean that the egoist literally shuts himself up, in hermit-like isolation, avoiding all contact with other human beings, for in his 'Rejoinder' to Moses Hess Stirner explicitly denies this interpretation of his meaning: by engaging in intercourse with others the egoist may please and enrich himself, and since 'he who loves someone is certainly richer than he who loves no one' the egoist may befriend or even 'love' other human beings in whose persons or society he takes pleasure.[3] However, the pragmatic, utilitarian type of intercourse here envisaged, incidentally rewarding as it may sometimes be to his temporary partners, clearly does not involve the egoist in anything resembling deep and formative relationships to which he personally commits himself as a true friend or lover. In all his intercourse with others the egoist starts from his own interests and needs, and 'makes himself the central point',[4] attuning his responses to the rhythm of his own shifting equilibrium, and concerning himself with the interests and needs of the other only in so far as they reflect, support, or serve his own. If a true relationship is one in which a person opens himself unreservedly to another, whom he freely receives and to whom he fully gives himself, the pragmatic intercourse of the egoist is presumably carried on without forming a single true relationship. Outwardly he may collaborate with others, participate with them in enterprises of common interest, and even take an inherent pleasure in the mere society of certain individuals whose personal qualities he favours and whom he may therefore be said, in this superficial sense, to 'love'; but inwardly his life is a conscious assertion of his own independence of others, from whom—even in the moments of greatest intimacy—he ultimately dissociates his intact and private being, preserving himself in the last analysis for himself alone. 'I want merely to be

[1] D.E., p. 159.
[2] D.E., loc. cit.
[3] See *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, pp. 373–4.
[4] D.E., p. 41.

I', says Stirner. 'I think nothing of Nature, men and their laws, human society and i s love, and I sever every general connection with it.' To all of these, he concludes, 'I oppose the "ataraxy" of my Ego.'[1]

It seems that for the conscious egoist, in the words of Helmut Thielicke, 'freedom is identical with solipsism'.[2] Like the Marquis de Sade (whom Sartre compares to Stirner's Unique One), the egoist's experience is 'the affirmation of absolute non-communication'.[3] Of course, Stirner is not literally a 'solipsist'. *Der Einzige* is full of references to other 'egos', whom Stirner directly addresses in the second person, or with whom he apparently aligns himself in the first person plural. 'You are not to me, and I am not to you, a higher being';[4] 'neither I nor you are speakable, we are unutterable';[5] 'let us aspire to . . . one-sidedness':[6] Stirner's language throughout acknowledges the existence of others as conscious, choosing, acting selves who are free to establish their own identity and to realize their own possibilities. Stirner clearly does not consider himself to be *literally* 'the unique one'. 'The Unique One' is rather the metaphysical identity into which he ultimately projects himself: it is the identity which *he* chooses to establish for himself, while others identify themselves as 'Christians', 'Socialis s' or 'Humanists'. The original condition of men is indeed one of *isolation* in the sense of mutual exclusiveness, for at the psychological centre of each individual there is an impenetrable core which no relationship can modify, and in his innermost subjectivity each individual transcends the world and o hers. This is not solitude in the sense of literal *uniqueness*, but it is solitude in the sense of perpetual *transcendence*: each individual is forever beyond the reach of every other individual. However, if this natural solitude is the original condition of every individual, if it is a fixed and given fact of the situation in which every individual involuntarily finds himself, then it must be contrasted with the metaphysical solitude of 'The Unique One', which is an *artificial* solitude, deliberately contrived and consciously willed. The metaphysical solitude

[1] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 412. [2] Thielicke, *Nihilism*, ch. XII, sec. 1.
[3] Sartre, *The Problem of Method*, p. 115.
[4] D.E., p. 53. [5] D.E., p. 364. [6] D.E., loc. cit.

of The Unique One is not an inherited condition, but a symbolic choice. As a formal acceptance and free appropriation of his original situation, it is a self-chosen and thus truly *existential* solitude.

Thus, when Stirner speaks of 'creating himself', he is presumably referring to this project of creating his own identity as 'The Unique One' within the terms of his personal metaphysical system. Now, the terms of his metaphysical system are deliberately chosen to reflect and carry forward those original truths about his situation which he recognizes to be fundamental in it. If one of these is the truth that the innermost being of each individual is utterly inaccessible and that consequently no real communion can ever exist between individuals, then it is this original truth, existentially appropriated and resumed within Stirner's own metaphysical terminology, that the metaphysical concept of 'The Unique One' symbolically reflects. The metaphysical system of which The Unique One is the central figure does not set out to give a literal description of the individual's experience, but to convert this experience—by conceptual reconstruction and where necessary conceptual invention—into a living symbol of the individual's personal response to the original experience itself. Within the system of *Der Einzige* the historical Max Stirner is converted into the metaphysical 'Unique One'; the fact of his personal remoteness and insularity is converted into the doctrine of The Unique One's cosmic 'uniqueness'; and so the actual solitude inwardly experienced by the living individual is converted into the theoretical solipsism proclaimed in and through 'The Unique One' as a metaphysical concept. The metaphysical system is intended to be a symbolic purgation of the individual's original experience, which it sublimates and resumes. And thus it comes about that The Unique One empirically recognizes the literal existence of other 'egos' as incidental items in the objective furniture of the natural universe, but that nevertheless, from within the sanctity of his private metaphysical universe, he is ultimately able to declare: 'I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego: I am unique . . . and everything about me is unique . . . this is the meaning of The Unique One.'[1]

[1] D.E., p. 423.

The solipsism of The Unique One, then, is a purely metaphysical solipsism, asserted and maintained within the metaphysical system in which The Unique One emerges as 'the sole ego'. If the metaphysical solitude of The Unique One is absolute, it is because he has identified himself *as* 'The Unique One'. Now, granted that this is his ultimate metaphysical identity, what is the specifically ethical posture that he adopts, conformably to this self-chosen identity? How does The Unique One deport himself towards those others whose claims he has symbolically repudiated?

'For me,' says Stirner, 'no one is a person to be respected . . . but solely an *object* . . . an interesting or uninteresting object, useful or useless.'[1] The total egoism of The Unique One consists in this: that his subjectivity is affirmed by denying the subjectivity of others, by treating other persons as if they were simply natural phenomena to be studied and manipulated without regard to their existential claims as persons—in short, by reducing others to the status of *objects*. The egoist scrutinizes his environment, seeking its points of weakness, noting those features which may be useful to him and which may be brought under his control, avoiding or destroying anything that might harm or hinder him, and ignoring everything that neither serves nor impedes his purposes. His relationship to other human beings is no different from his relationship to the rest of his environment, which he views as raw material to be administered and duly exploited. His relationship to others is thus a purely *technical* relationship, a managerial relationship. The egoist's conduct is not governed by the interests or wishes of others, except in so far as some consideration of these is found to be technically advantageous; the interests or wishes of others may require to be taken into account as a datum on which his managerial decisions need to be based, and a studied deference to the feelings of others may be found to facilitate the egoist's own purposes. But in themselves, for their own sakes, the needs and interests of others count for nothing in his eyes.

It is true that certain individuals may have qualities in which the egoist takes an inherent pleasure. Such an individual may be 'beloved' of the egoist in the sense that the egoist will not treat

[1] D.E., p. 365.

him *merely* as a means to his own separate and ulterior purposes, but will also at the same time take a *direct* interest in the evolution and expression of those qualities which are the immediate objects of his admiration. This does not, however, imply an abandonment, even a partial abandonment of his original egoistic project. It certainly does not imply that the egoist is prepared to treat the 'beloved' individual as an end-in-himself. Let us suppose that the egoist cherishes Karl, not for any ulterior purpose (such as borrowing money or enlisting his electoral support), but because he is amused by Karl's wit and admires Karl's erudition. The egoist certainly does not love Heinrich, from whom he borrows money, or Ludwig, whose electoral support he needs, but he would describe himself as 'loving' Karl. His love, however, cannot possibly be a love of *Karl*, in and for himself, as a loving and beloved subject, for the egoist precisely denies Karl's subjectivity and repudiates his claims upon him as a person. His love is not a love of the whole individual who is Karl, but a love of certain objective qualities, wit and erudition, which Karl happens to evince in high degree and which the egoist loves, just as he loves certain material objects, perhaps good food and a beautiful landscape, while remaining indifferent to the many other objects (the décor of the restaurant, the encircling hills) by which they happen to be surrounded; to Karl's other qualities, his physical appearance or his command of languages, the egoist will be utterly indifferent, unless he can discover some use to which they may be put; and should Karl lose those qualities which have endeared him to the egoist, or should the latter grow tired of them, then the egoist's 'love for Karl' would wholly cease and Karl would became once more an object of complete indifference. The egoist's 'love' for another is not accompanied by any sense of responsibility towards the other: strictly speaking, he does not *care* for the person whom he 'loves'. The 'loved one' is not a unique and irreplaceable object: how could he be, since it is his egoistic 'lover' who is himself The Unique One? For this reason, the egoist always keeps himself aloof from the 'loved one', to whom he may give much, but to whom he will always refuse to give himself, unconditionally and in his entirety. 'I can with joy

sacrifice to him numberless enjoyments,' says Stirner, ' I can deny myself numberless things for the enhancement of his pleasure . . . but *myself*, my own self, I do not sacrifice to him, but remain an egoist and—enjoy him. . . . Although to one passion I sacrifice others, I do not on that account go so far as to sacrifice myself, nor sacrifice anything of that whereby I truly am myself: I do not sacrifice my peculiar value, my *self-possession*.'[1] The man who loves another so much that he at last forgets the essential separateness of his own exclusive being is the man who 'has given himself up, because he cannot *dissolve* himself, and consequently cannot absolve himself of his passion: he is possessed'.[2] By contrast, the conscious egoist is constantly mindful that the other is the object of his love purely and entirely because he happens to evince certain qualities which directly gratify the wishes and desires of the egoist himself. 'To the egoist nothing is high enough for him to humble himself before it, nothing so independent that he would live for love of it, nothing so sacred that he would sacrifice himself to it. The egoist's love rises in selfishness, flows in the bed of selfishness, and empties into selfishness again.'[3]

For the egoist, the 'loved one' ceases to be an object of his loving interest when he loses those qualities which in the first place made him interesting. The man who continues to feel a unique and absolute concern for his beloved, whatever happens to him and whatever he may become, because the beloved other is the object of his unconditional and irrevocable love, is a man who has become subservient to his love instead of keeping it subservient to him. 'Selfish love is far distant from unselfish, mystical, or romantic love. . . . Love becomes blind and crazy when a *must* takes it out of my power (infatuation), romantic by a *should* entering into it, by the "object" becoming sacred to me. . . . Now the object no longer exists for me, but I for it.'[4] The unselfish lover has turned the beloved other into a 'sacred' object, which he cannot transcend, because he is enveloped and possessed by it. His love has become an essentially 'religious' love, issuing commands and making demands. But the total egoist, as we have seen, is also the total atheist, who neither worships the God of Love nor

[1] D.E., pp. 339–40. [2] D.E., loc. cit. [3] D.E., p. 344. [4] D.E., p. 342.

permits his personal love to become 'a divine power above him'.[1] He refuses to acknowledge, with the 'religious' lover, the existence of any objects which are 'absolutely lovable';[2] and he refuses to acknowledge, with 'unselfish' lovers generally, the existence of any objects which 'deserve' or 'are entitled to' his love. 'Every love to which there clings but the smallest speck of obligation is an unselfish love, and, so far as this speck reaches, a possessedness.'[3] The egoist repudiates any such obligation. However great his love, he never regards the loved one as 'any more than the *nourishment* of my passion . . . as any more than the *object of my love*, which my love *uses* . . . thus I only *utilize* him: I *enjoy* him'.[4] The egoist's love is an arbitrary love, recognizing no one as 'worthy' of his love, but loving only those individuals who happen to gratify *him*. He will 'kiss away the troubled crease on the beloved forehead' because he himself 'cannot bear it'; if he did not happen to love this individual, 'he might go on making creases, they would not trouble me; I am only driving away *my* trouble'.[5] The egoist's love is an irresponsible love, recognizing no obligations to the loved one, whom he cherishes solely for his *own* sake. 'My love is *mine* only when it consists entirely in a selfish and egoistic interest, and when consequently the object of my love is really *my* object or my property, to which I owe nothing and have no obligation, any more than I have obligations to my eye—which I nevertheless cherish with the greatest care, but always only on *my* account.'[6]

This rejection of the concept of 'obligation' in fact epitomizes the whole ethical posture of the egoist. 'No thing is sacred in itself, but only by my *declaring it sacred*,'[7] says The Unique One, who declares nothing to be sacred. 'Moral obligations' are like the sacred ideals of religion above all in this, that they essentially seek to alienate me from myself but that they cannot accomplish this alienation unless I freely choose to surrender myself to them. Indeed, moral concepts as such—duty, obligation, justice, virtue—are like all other general concepts no more than artificial verbal constructions, figments in the mind of the moralizer which do not

[1] See D.E., p. 344. [2] D.E., p. 342. [3] D.E., p. 343. [4] D.E., p. 346.
[5] D.E., p. 341. [6] D.E., p. 343. [7] D.E., p. 87.

exist if he does not conceive them and which have no authority other than the authority with which he chooses to invest them. The conscious egoist recognizes morality, the morality of love along with all other forms of morality, for what it is—a tissue of empty abstractions. The credulous may allow others to gull them by moral rhetoric into abandoning their own best interests, but the egoist is not deceived and cannot be intimidated. The conscious egoist stands forward as the complete amoralist. He is indifferent to the wishes and needs of others when these take the form of a particular demand made upon him by a particular individual; and he is no less indifferent when the wishes and needs of others are rationalized and codified into a system of moral rules expressing the general demands made upon him by others in general. Others will always try to idealize their own self-interest, particularly when they are acting in concert. Ready though they may be to coerce the recalcitrant individual, they would prefer to gain his voluntary submission, by convincing him that he *owes* obedience to the authority in the name of which they profess to act, by appealing to his duty to the State, to his family, to society, perhaps by at last appealing to his duty to Humanity. The power actually possessed by such institutions or groups is a concrete and external fact, which the egoist takes into account in determining his own interests, but about which he can often do little. The 'moral authority' to which they lay claim, however, is no concrete fact; it is their attempt to capture the individual from within by seizing his consciousness and drugging it with their verbal magic; and to all such attempts the conscious egoist, in his reiterated self-possession, is consistently and effortlessly immune.

Keeping his eye coolly on his own interests, the egoist does not allow himself to be deflected by meaningless moral strictures or appeals. The 'dictates of eternal and immutable morality' invariably turn out to be no more than the conventions of his particular society or of the ruling group within his society, perhaps age-old conventions shared by most other societies, but still only the conventions that others have adopted—ultimately for utilitarian reasons, to secure their own ends, or perhaps for superstitious reasons, because they believe in a divine Lawgiver or

because they have at last become hypnotized by their own rhetoric. As a rhetorical assault upon the consciousness of the recalcitrant individual, every moral code seeks to induce him to make an inward surrender of his sovereignty, and in this respect one moral code is the same as any other, the most 'enlightened' body of ethical counsels seeking essentially to establish a fifth column within the inmost consciousness of the individual no less than the most primitive system of tribal taboos. In the Germany of *Der Einzige* moral reformers like Weitling and Bettina were calling upon their contemporaries to regard anti-social behaviour as a kind of disease which required, not punishment as if the criminal were responsible for his actions, but therapeutic treatment, since the criminal was himself really the victim of evil social conditions. But according to Stirner: '*Curative means* or *healing* is only the reverse side of *punishment*, the *theory of cure* runs parallel with the *theory of punishment;* if the latter regards an action as a sin against what is right, the former takes it for a sin of the man *against himself*, as a decadence from his health. . . . "Crime" or "disease" are neither of them an *egoistic* view of the matter, a judgment *starting from me*, but starting from *another*—to wit, whether it injures *right*, general right, or the *health* partly of the individual (the sick one), partly of the generality (society).'[1] Who is to say what constitutes my 'health'? Written into the ostensibly medical concepts of mental health and mental hygiene are certain definite norms, reflecting the ethical standards of the medical profession or of society at large. Concepts like 'psychological normality,' 'emotional maturity', and so on function within a moral code which is more enlightened only in the sense that it is more subtle: covert moral judgments are preached in the form of objective (and therefore unobjectionable) statements of medical fact. Whether the preacher preaches against 'sin' or against 'emotional immaturity', however, the aim remains the same: to 'produce *feelings* in us, to instil them in us, instead of leaving their production to ourselves however they may turn out'.[2] Maturity, like virtue, turns out to mean conformity. 'The young are of age,

[1] D.E., p. 280.

[2] D.E., p. 80.

when they twitter like the old; they are driven through school to learn the old song, and, when they have this by heart, then they are declared of age.'[1]

Some critics have charged Stirner with beginning by rejecting the concept of morality as such (and with it the very idea of a 'moral code'), but ending up by adumbrating a moral code of his own, a frivolous and licentious code, in terms of existing moral standards a highly scandalous code, but a moral code nonetheless, which prescribes certain types of conduct and condemns others. Thus according to Sidney Hook, 'despite his avowals of complete ethical antinomianism, Stirner does seek to formulate his moral code'.[2] Despite the fact that Stirner repeatedly describes himself as repudiating the concept of 'morality' as such and not merely rebelling against the particular, narrow moral code of his society and time, according to Hook what Stirner offered was simply a 'radical revision of the existing ethical code', a new, extravagant, and sinister moral code which would free people to commit 'polygamy, blasphemous desecration, even incest': what Stirner offered was not amoralism but 'immoralism'.[3] Hook might have added that Stirner's new 'moral code' also furnished a licence to lie, to cheat, to rob, and to kill, for Stirner explicitly denies the obligations of truth-telling, promise-keeping, and respect for property and life. This interpretation of Stirner's purpose surely rests on a confusion, however. Stirner's whole argument is surely that moral obligations of *any* kind are no more than hollow verbal devices for dividing a man from his own best interests, which 'moral considerations' induce him to subordinate to the interests of others (or to an imaginary ideal 'interest' of his own, which others carefully determine for him) by converting his free egoistic consciousness into a servile, scrupulous, guilt-ridden consciousness. If, by way of illustrating and emphasizing his thesis, Stirner deliberately cites those moral obligations which have been widely held to be among the most sacred and binding—piety and truthfulness, for example—this is not because he is adumbrating a specific new moral code in which blasphemy and lying are to be obligatory but because he is concerned to reaffirm that *nothing, not*

[1] D.E., loc. cit. [2] Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, ch. 5, sec. I, 3. [3] Loc. cit.

even those primordial 'obligations', can induce the self-possessed egoist to take any step that is not in the fullest accord with his own distinct interests as he himself determines them. His citation of these particular 'moral obligations' as empty and meaningless is intended to serve his general purpose, which is a purely negative one: namely, to expose all moral imperatives as essentially verbal figments, whose illusory authority vanishes as soon as the individual becomes conscious of the rhetorical imposture which is being practised upon him.

The Unique One, then, is not an immoralist, but an amoralist. His text is not 'Evil, be thou my good', but 'Let me be beyond good and evil'. His egoism is a repudiation of any and every moral imperative. It might indeed seem as if Stirner were issuing an imperative of his own when he *enjoins* men to repudiate moral imperatives, for certainly the injunction, 'Do as it pleases you!', itself has the grammatical form of an imperative. It might further seem as if Stirner were proposing an 'ideal selfhood' of his own, the selfhood of the ideal egoist, which would indeed be a logical contradiction, since the 'ideal egoist' would presumably have to be the man *without* a self-ideal. Some critics have in fact charged Stirner with committing this precise contradiction. 'Here,' according to Hook, 'Stirner finds himself transfixed by his own logic. Is the egoistic self to be worshipped as an absolute ideal? Is our ordinary empirical self, which is not steely selfish, not to feel free to pursue something else? How does this egoistic ideal then differ from any other *idée fixe*? Does it not become, in Stirner's own terms, a superstitious worship of one possible good under all circumstances, and therefore religious?'[1] However, surely this criticism of Stirner also rests on an obvious confusion. If someone asks, 'What shall I do?', and is given the answer, 'Do as you please!', this is *not* answering his request for a directive: it is a *refusal* to give him any directives. If someone asks, 'What kind of a person shall I strive ideally to become?', and is given the answer, 'Do not strive to become any kind of ideal person!', this is *not* answering his request for a personal ideal; it is a *refusal* to prescribe any personal ideals. 'I have no duty towards others,' says Stirner,

[1] Op. cit., ch. 5, sec. I, 4.

'and I only have a duty towards myself so long as I distinguish myself from myself.'[1] The egoist does not seek to become something other than he is. His egoism is a complete self-acceptance. Theself of the egoist is not an ideal to be studied and achieved: it is the reality which he already is, and from which he steadfastly refuses to separate himself.

It cannot be denied, however, that there remain some grave internal inconsistencies in Stirner's conceptof 'conscious egoism' as he himself portrays it in the figure of The Unique One. In *Der Einzige*, as we have seen, Stirner frequently refers to other 'egos' and habitually writes as if The Unique One were surrounded by other persons who, like himself, were conscious, choosing, acting selves. In itself this is not necessarily inconsistent with the concept of The Unique One's 'uniqueness' if, as was earlier argued, The Unique One's 'uniqueness' is a purely metaphysical concept expressing the conscious egoist's symbolic choice of himself as 'the sole ego' and his consequent resolve to deny any moral or existential status to those others whose brute, literal, factual existence, as incidental items in his environment, he of course acknowledges. In an intelligible sense, the conscious egoist is positing himself as metaphysically 'unique' if he resolves to reduce other human beings to the status of 'objects'—thinking, feeling, choosing objects, no doubt, and therefore objects to be manipulated and exploited in highly distinctive ways (for example, by verbal artifice or emotional pressure)—but nevertheless *objects*, to be exploited not respected, to be manipulated not genuinely consulted. To remain true to his identity as 'unique' in this sense, however, The Unique One plainly must treat *all* other human beings as objects, and he must treat them *always* as objects. If he ever admits any others to the metaphysical status which he claims for himself, the status of the pure Consumer to whom everything is merely pabulum, then manifestly he cannot identify himself as 'The Unique One'. It would, for example, be clearly inconsistent for a total egoist, who is determined to further only his own interests, to encourage others to behave towards him in

[1] D.E., p. 373.

the conscienceless, predatory ways in which he himself intend to behave towards them. The total egoist, who proclaims himself an amoralist, surely ought to reverse the Kantian doctrine of universalism, according to which I ought only to act on principles which I can will to become universal principles of human conduct: whereas the egoist is always rapacious, cynical, and brazenly indifferent to the interests of others, and is prepared if need arises to be faithless, deceitful, or downright brutal, it is surely in his interest that *others* should behave in the docile, scrupulou , law-abiding ways which he himself despises. A law unto himself because he has 'seen through' and 'dissolved' the illusory authority of so-called moral laws, surely it is in the interest of the egoist to leave others in the grip of their moral illusions, so that he can count on *their* veracity and good faith, although he has no intention of copying their innocence.

Now it must be admitted that, at this precise point, Stirner lapses from his own concept of total egoism. *Der Einzige* is full of exhortations to its readers to become audacious, piratical egoists, to dissolve the moral shackles which bind them, and to practise inward defiance against the authority of State and society. These exhortations are inconsistent with Stirner's concept of total egoism, not because they are moral directives (for they are not) but because they clearly deprive The Unique One of an advantage which he might profitably have deployed, namely the crucial advantage accruing to the man who is not bound by moral considerations in his dealings with men who are. By encouraging others to become conscious egoists like himself The Unique One is inexplicably inviting them to share this advantage, instead of remaining the consistent egoist to the la t and deploying against others the hypnotic abracadabra of morality, to which he himself would be safely immune but which might induce his naiver victims to subordinate their interests to his own. If morality is essentially an opiate for converting natural egoists into tractable material for exploitation, it is evidently in the interests of the conscious egoist to adapt this inexpensive and effective weapon to his own ends. In exhorting others to become, like himself, invincible to moral strictures and appeals, The Unique One is

pointlessly relinquishing an instrument of exploitation which was ready to his hand, and is thereby showing himself to be less than the total egoist which he claims to be.

But Stirner's desire to confer upon others the gift of egoistic clear-sightedness which will free them from their moral illusions is more than simply an error of his egoistic judgment, the letting slip of a major tactical advantage he might have enjoyed. The idea of a 'Unique One' who attempts to proselytize is a flagrant contradiction in terms. And yet Stirner gives abundant proof of his desire to do precisely this, to convince others that they too can deliver themselves from the spurious powers that bind them by a pure act of inward self-assertion and self-appropriation. Throughout *Der Einzige* his language implies that other individuals, who like himself are naturally transcendent to the world by which they have allowed themselves to become possessed, can, like himself, each perform an act of complete metaphysical recovery by each positing his separate consciousness as the unique centre of a restored and reconstituted egoistic 'world' of which he is the sovereign and sole proprietor. 'I am ego and you are ego,' says Stirner. 'Neither I nor you are speakable, we are unutterable.'[1] Both Stirner and his readers are essentially beyond the reach of concepts, just as they are essentially beyond the reach of morality, society, and the State. 'Every ego is from his very birth a criminal against the people, the State,' says *Der Einzige*. 'The unbridled ego—and this we originally are, and in our secret inwardness we remain so always—is the never-ceasing criminal in the State.'[2] Societies and States, it is elsewhere said, are directly established against 'us egoists'.[3] Stirner is continually addressing himself to all 'those who want to be egoists'.[4] He is continually exhorting the natural, unconscious egoists around him to become conscious, self-possessed egoists—in fact to become 'Unique Ones'. He envisages a state of affairs in which there might be numerous 'Unique Ones', and even considers such questions as 'whether the Unique Ones might form a party' (a suggestion which he emphatically dismisses).[5] And in his 'Rejoinder' to Feuerbach, whom

[1] D.E., p. 364. [2] D.E., p. 233.
[3] D.E., p. 260. [4] D.E., p. 230. [5] D.E., pp. 276–7.

he ironically hails as also 'unique',[1] Stirner speaks at length of the purely personal 'world' in which Feuerbach lives, of which he is the very centre, and which exists only because he, Feuerbach, has chosen to live in it; and Stirner adds that what is true of Feuerbach is equally true of everyone else.[2]

Of course a privileged and independent observer (not himself claiming to be a 'Unique One') might well envisage a state of affairs in which there were numerous 'Unique Ones', each pursuing his own interests in total disregard of the interests of others, and if it should happen that he found a perverse pleasure in contemplating this state of affairs one could even imagine such an observer exhorting the contestants, as Stirner does, 'Take hold, and take what you require! With this the war of all against all is declared.'[3] But Stirner does *not* profess to be a privileged and independent observer. He claims to be *himself* 'The Unique One', pursuing his own interests alone and caring for no one. As The Unique One he unequivocally says, 'There is no right outside me: if it is right *for me*, it is right . . . as for others, that is their worry.'[4] His words become touched with ambiguity, however, when he adds, 'Let them look after themselves'[5] (which may be an expression of pure unconcern, or may be an exhortation to others to follow his example); and he flagrantly contradicts himself when he goes on later to say, 'That is right which is right for you.'[6] At least this last statement is contradictory if it is made in Stirner's capacity as the self-chosen Unique One. It is contradictory unless we deem it to have been made by an independent observer to whom all contestants are equal—but of course for The Unique One there is no question of equality, or even of comparison, between himself and the other individuals against whom he asserts himself. An independent observer might say ,'We have only one relation to each other, that of *usableness*, utility, use';[7] The Unique One ought rather to say, 'You have only one relation to *me*, that of *usableness*, utility, use.' It is The Unique One who says, 'I do not step shyly back from your property, but look upon it always as *my* property, in which I need to "respect" nothing';[8]

[1] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 384. [2] Op. cit., p. 354. [3] D.E., p. 301. [4] D.E., p. 222. [5] D.E., loc. cit. [6] D.E., p. 240. [7] D.E., p. 347. [8] D.E., p. 289.

when he adds, 'Pray do the like with what you call my property!',[1] however, he is extending to another the licence which as The Unique One he ought to claim uniquely for himself and is thereby emasculating the concept of total egoism which the figure of The Unique One is supposed to embody.

Similar inconsistencies abound in Stirner's descriptions of The Unique One's characteristic forms of 'intercourse'. The Unique One's encounters with others are said to be the encounters of 'an I and a Thou', not—as these terms might imply—rich existential encounters between two autonomous individuals each of whom responds to the deepest being of the other as a person, but total conflicts between two uncompromising egoists who are 'utterly distinct from and opposed to each other'.[2] This description indeed suggests a 'war of all against all'. Yet Stirner certainly envisages situations in which one egoist, in order to 'multiply his power', will enter into 'association' with other egoists whose interests are temporarily parallel to his own. Such egoistic associations, we are told, differ crucially from existing models of human society. 'You bring your whole power and ability into an association, and *make yourself count*; in a society you, with your working power, are *put to use*; in the former you live egoistically, in the latter humanly, that is, religiously, as a "member of the body of the Lord"; to a society you owe what you have, and are in duty bound to it, are—possessed by "social duties"; an association you utilize, and abandon it undutifully and faithlessly when you see no way to use it further. If a society is more than you, it is more to you than yourself; an association is only your instrument, or the sword with which you sharpen and increase your natural power; the association exists for you and through you, the society on the contrary lays claim to you for itself and exists even without you; in short, a society is something sacred, whereas the association is *your own*; a society consumes *you*, whereas *you* consume the association.'[3] A passage like this one, however, is characteristically ambiguous. If it outlines a blueprint for a new kind of confederation in which the limited power of the solitary egoist will be indefinitely multiplied by acting in concert with others, that is,

[1] D.E., loc. cit. [2] D.E., p. 209. [3] D.E., pp. 366–7.

if it represents a kind of Hobbesian 'social contract' without the Hobbesian 'sovereign' and restricted to conscious egoists, then an obvious question immediately poses itself. Why should a conscious egoist, prudently intent upon maximizing his own interests, select for his associates *other conscious egoists*? 'I would rather be referred to men's selfishness than to their "kindnesses", their mercy, pity, etc.',[1] says Stirner, who is presumably implying that the prudential egoism of others is comparatively reliable, while their benevolent and sympathetic feelings are a notoriously uncertain factor. The conscious egoist as Stirner describes him, however, is eminently *not* reliable, for he is explicitly portrayed as an unprincipled and promiscuous adventurer, ceaselessly dispersing and recollecting his changing interests, a rootless and evasive opportunist, whose protean identity is in constant 'flux and dissolution' and whose only fixed characteristic is that he does exactly as he pleases. One would have thought that a conscious egoist looking for associates to 'utilize and consume' until they were of no further use, when he would 'abandon them faithlessly', would have given his fellow vampires a very wide berth, as being by far too devious and knowledgeable for his machiavellian purposes. The 'associates' of the conscious egoist are not envisaged as trusted colleagues, to be accommodated and consulted; they are envisaged as victims, to be blandished, exploited, and then discarded. The obvious 'associates' for the egoist, therefore, are not his fellow egoists but precisely those innocent and upright men of goodwill whose 'kindness, mercy, pity, etc.' Stirner so rashly repudiates.

It must be admitted, then, that in *Der Einzige* there are many passages which strongly suggest that The Unique One's moral emancipation can be shared by any number of others; that such others, on becoming conscious, self-possessed egoists, themselves attain to the dignity of 'Unique Ones'; and that it is from among his fellow 'Unique Ones' that The Unique One who is Max Stirner naturally seeks his preferred associates. According to James J. Martin, 'Stirner wanted all to be free; he was not arguing

[1] D.E., p. 363.

just for himself or for a special segment of mankind.'[1] This interpretation of *Der Einzige* can only be upheld, however, by ignoring what Stirner in other passages says about the purely 'one-sided' character of the egoist's relationship to his associates and about The Unique One's 'uniqueness' in the world of which he is the centre and in which he is 'the sole ego'. As we have seen, although Stirner speaks of an 'association of egoists', his concrete descriptions of The Unique One's actual relationship to his associates in effect demonstrate that an association whose members were all 'Unique Ones' could scarcely begin to function: an association of 'Unique Ones', each regarding the others as his tools to be manipulated and faithlessly abandoned when they were of no further use, would in practice be impossibly centrifugal. A population of 'Unique Ones' who recognized each other as 'Unique Ones' would exist in a state of perpetual distrust and suspicion, continually flaring up into open combat: the idea of a population of 'Unique Ones' is the idea of a 'war of all against all', of a Hobbesian 'state of nature' but a state of nature from which there would be no escape by means of a social contract, since the 'Unique Ones' would not be Hobbesian natural egoists but self-chosen, conscious egoists who would deliberately refuse to make the kind of self-renunciation required in a social contract.

Moreover, as we have also seen, The Unique One is supposed to be the centre of his purely personal 'world', which exists because he has chosen it, which revolves around him and his changing interests, and in which he is 'the sole ego' in the sense that the other human figures around him are reduced to the status of objects. 'For me no one is a person to be respected . . . but solely an *object* . . . an interesting or uninteresting object, useful or useless.'[2] Now, an independent and neutral observer could properly take cognizance of the fact that a plurality of 'Unique Ones' existed, who were all the subjective centres and exclusive proprietors of their own private 'worlds', and that within the personal world of another 'Unique One' the particular Unique One who was Max Stirner figured as no more than an incidental

[1] *The Ego and His Own*, 1963, Introduction by James J. Martin, p. xvii.
[2] D.E., p. 365.

constituent, an 'object' to be utilized and consumed; but the particular Unique One who is Max Stirner cannot himself attribute any such sovereign status to another individual, for if he casts *himself* in the role of 'The Unique One', as of course he does, this means that he has resolved utterly to deny the subjectivity of others, utterly to deny that inward transcendence in sole virtue of which they could cast *themselves* as 'Unique Ones' with the power to form a metaphysical universe by surmounting and reconstituting the brute elements of their original experience. The Unique One's self-choice is necessarily his choice of himself as *The* Unique One. We have seen that Stirner ultimately recognizes this: 'I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego: I am unique . . . and everything about me is unique . . . this is the meaning of The Unique One.'[1]

It must be admitted, then, that *Der Einzige* contains many passages which are inconsistent with the concept of 'The Unique One' as Stirner, in his more lucid moments, expounds it. Nevertheless the essential meaning of 'The Unique One' is clear, and to it Stirner fundamentally adheres. It is essentially the concept of someone whose egoistic detachment is complete. In his descriptions of the 'associations of egoists' Stirner sometimes seems to be misguidedly offering a blueprint for a new kind of highly selective community; nevertheless he is all the time fundamentally aware that his total egoist cannot really participate in any kind of community, just as he cannot participate in any true relationship, for 'community', like 'relationship', implies a recognition of other participants as inherently equal with oneself at least in the sense that they, too, are the subjects of certain definite rights which are inherent in their status as participants. 'Community', Stirner finally says, 'is an impossibility. . . . No man is my equal, for I regard him, like all other beings, as my property.'[2] Stirner sometimes writes as if The Unique One were permanently in a state of total conflict with other egoists, as if The Unique One lived along with other egoists in a state of 'war of all against all'; nevertheless he remains fundamentally aware that The Unique One cannot really be regarded as 'an ego along with other egos',

[1] D.E., p. 423. [2] D.E., pp. 364–5.

and that 'the last and most decided opposition, that of unique individual against unique individual, is fundamentally beyond what is called opposition' since in the end 'opposition vanishes in complete--severance or uniqueness'.[1] The many ambiguities and inconsistencies committed by Stirner in expounding his concept of 'The Unique One' are undeniably defects in his performance as an expositor, but they are in the last analysis quite incidental to his exposition of a concept which is essentially self-consistent and unambiguous. The concept Stirner has devised, however careless he may sometimes be in elaborating and illustrating it, is essentially that of a man who has chosen to dwell in a world of which he constitutes himself the centre and the sole inhabitant. By his self-choice as 'The Unique One' he has depopulated the world, destroying the subjectivity of others and converting them into mere alimentation for his own subjectivity; and thus the pragmatic 'associations' which he promiscuously forms, far from being living personal relationships, are merely his characteristic modes of manipulating those human objects in his environment whom he has appropriated in order to exploit. From the standpoint of the man who announces himself as The Unique One, therefore, there can be no recognition of the existence of other 'Unique Ones'. Within the closed circle of Stirner's metaphysical system there can be one and only one Unique One, and this is manifestly none other than the author of the system himself, whose act of self-identification it publishes and whose purely personal world it describes. For the author of *Der Einzige*, at any rate, the one and only Unique One must be none other than Stirner himself.

At the beginning of the present chapter it was said that Stirner's portrait of The Unique One illustrates three main and recurring themes. We have now discussed the metaphysical solitude of the total egoist, his utter detachment within his self-enclosed and self-sufficient being, and we have examined the more specifically ethical posture of the egoist, his repudiation of the claims of others and his accompanying rejection of those moral and social im-

[1] D.E., p. 243.

peratives which seek to establish their alien authority over his consciousness. We must finally consider the egoist's fundamental existential project: we must consider the ways in which, by ceaseless acts of appropriation, he assembles the fluctuating totality which is his 'property'; and we must consider the ways in which he preserves his 'self-possession', by constantly resuming his property within the creative and destructive nothingness which he originally and ultimately is.

The Unique One, like the Sartrean *pour-soi*, is that being who is what he is not and is not what he is. He discovers himself as essentially a 'nothingness' by distinguishing himself from everything that presents itself to his negating consciousness. Stirner continually refers to himself as the 'unspeakable', the 'unutterable', whose fugitive, perpetually withdrawing being eludes the grasp of concepts and baffles the resources of language: 'For me this poor devil of language lacks a word.'[1] *Things* can be described and conceived, but the egoist's first self-discovery occurs when he finds that he is not a 'thing' in the world alongside other things. As a consciousness, he transcends the entities of which he is conscious, placing himself above and beyond them: 'I find myself behind the things.'[2] He is literally a 'nothing', a perfect non-entity.

His second self-discovery occurs when he finds that he is always distinct from, and more than, the *ideas* of which he is conscious. 'Just as I find myself behind the things, and that as mind, so I have to find *myself* later behind the *thoughts* also, and that as their creator and *proprietor*.'[3] Just as he essentially transcends the physical world, the world of things, so he essentially transcends the mental world, the world of concepts. A man does not exist as a Cartesian 'thinking substance' before he performs the *act* of thinking, any more than he exists as a 'singer' before he actually sings: it is in the act of thinking that he creates himself as a thinker, and thus he can always distinguish himself as he is in himself both from himself-as-thinker and from the particular thoughts that he thinks.[4] 'I, this Nothing,' says Stirner, 'will put forth my creations from myself.'[5] And because I am distinct from my thoughts,

[1] D.E., p. 215. [2] D.E., p. 22. [3] D.E., loc. cit.
[4] D.E., pp. 41–2. [5] D.E., p. 274.

which I create and own, I can always disengage myself from them by returning them to the nothingness from which I called them forth: any particular thought 'is only my judgment, which I can at any moment *change*, i.e. annihilate, take back into myself, and consume'.[1]

Thus The Unique One, although he is a thinking being, is not to be *identified* with his thinking or with his thoughts. Similarly, although he is a physical, sensuous being, he is not to be identified with his body or with his sensuous experiences and feelings: 'the sensuous, whatever it may be, when taken up into me becomes something non-sensuous, which, however, may again have sensuous effects, as by the stirring of my emotions and my blood'.[2] Although, in fact, The Unique One has many different qualities, he is not to be identified with any of these qualities, or with any combination of them: someone who respected him only as a 'Berliner', a 'European', or as a human being, says Stirner, would be 'paying me only a very indifferent respect . . . since he would be respecting only one of my *qualities*, not *me*'.[3] In his final inwardness The Unique One is pure negation, a moral and metaphysical void. 'The ego *destroys* all', says Stirner. 'Only the self-dissolving ego, the never-being ego . . . is really *me*.'[4]

Nevertheless, The Unique One *is* a thinking being; he *is* a physical being; and he *is* a Berliner, a European, a human being, and many other things besides. His identity is rooted in and returns to an essential ego which is pure nothingness in the sense of perpetual transcendence; but the series of choices, actions, and ideas which issue from this fertile void become extant in the world and form a fluctuating but objective totality, which constitutes the exoteric identity of The Unique One as he realizes and discloses himself in the world. 'I am not Nothing in the sense of vacuity, but the creative Nothing, out of which as creator I myself create everything.'[5] The Unique One is indeed originally and ultimately a 'nothingness'; but he is a dynamic, self-creating, appropriative nothingness, who presents himself to the world by subjugating and devouring it. He emerges into the world in order to annex, to exploit, and to consume. In his dynamic self-

[1] D.E., p. 398. [2] D.E., p. 399. [3] D.E., p. 204. [4] D.E., p. 213. [5] D.E., p. 14.

manifestation he reveals himself to be essentially an *imperialistic* nothingness. Like the Sartrean man, who 'is no other than a series of undertakings', who is 'the sum, the organization, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings',[1] Stirner's Unique One founds his overt identity in the world by distributing his investments throughout a fluctuating constellation of diverse projects and interests, and it is this transient, fluid totality which constitutes The Unique One's 'property', in and through which he has his distinctive being-in-the-world. The Unique One uses his power to carve his identity from the world. 'My power *is* my property,' says Stirner. 'My power *gives* me property. I myself *am* my power and through it I am my property.'[2] The 'transitory, mortal Creator'[3] who issues from his innermost nothingness in order to confiscate and enjoy the world is perpetually in process of *becoming* the totality in which he objectifies himself: 'Thou, Unique One, art "Unique One" only *together with thy property*.'[4] Yet he always remains more than the objective aggregate of his property, from which he perpetually dissociates himself and which he perpetually resumes into his profoundest subjectivity: 'In *The Unique One* the proprietor returns into the creative Nothingness from which he issues.'[5]

Of course, we may well wonder whether The Unique One, as Stirner describes him, is logically entitled to refer to anything as being really and truly his 'property'. If 'property' connotes not merely ownership but *lawful* ownership, it would seem that he most certainly is not, for The Unique One's characteristic form of egoism, as we have seen, expressly repudiates the concepts of 'right' and 'duty', 'lawful' and 'wrongful', and every concept entailing moral obligation or justification: 'Justified or unjustified—that does not concern me.'[6] Clearly the term 'property', as Stirner uses it, can refer only to those things of which the egoist is in *de facto* possession, those things which he at any given moment has in his power, without any implied claim that this *de facto* possession, this exercise of power, is morally justified on any grounds whatsoever. Stirner explicitly recognizes this: 'What

[1] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 42. [2] D.E., p. 217. [3] D.E., p. 429.
[4] *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 354. [5] D.E., p. 429. [6] D.E., p. 245.

then is *my* property? Nothing but what is in my *power*.'[1] The egoist will of course acknowledge that another person exercises effective control over some object, which is that person's 'property' in this purely factual sense. What he never acknowledges is that the other has anything corresponding to a 'just claim' over the object in question, for if the egoist were able to wrest control from him the object would then become the 'property' of the egoist, in the only sense that Stirner is prepared to admit. I am under no obligation to respect the property of another; and it equally follows, from Stirner's amoral conception of 'property', that to my own property 'I owe nothing and have no obligations, any more than I have obligations to my eye'.[2] My property is mine to use or to abuse, as I please, just as the property of others is mine to use or to abuse, if I can.

Stirner, then, is presenting an essentially positivistic account of 'property', freed from those ethical and juridical overtones which the word normally carries but which he dismisses as rhetorical figments. However, it must be admitted that, in many passages, his account is unnecessarily confused by his habit of restating his positivistic conception of 'property' in the very ethical and juridical terms which he has himself asserted to be vacuous. Presumably he does this in order to re-emphasize the vacuity of these terms, but the result is confusing. Where he ought to have said, 'There is no right, only might', he often prefers to say, 'Might is right'—although clearly if the term 'right' has a meaning distinct from that of the term 'might' this last statement is almost certainly false, while if the two terms have the same meaning the statement is completely tautologous. Thus (although he has explicitly affirmed the concepts of 'right' and of moral entitlement generally to be vacuous) Stirner unnecessarily confuses the issue by declaring, 'He who has power has—right',[3] by speaking of 'egoistic right',[4] and by saying of himself, 'I am *entitled* to everything that I have in my power.'[5] Nevertheless, once again Stirner's true meaning is fundamentally clear. When he says, for example, 'The tiger that attacks me is in the right, and I who

[1] D.E., p. 299. [2] D.E., p. 343. [3] D.E., p. 225.
[4] D.E., p. 223. [5] D.E., p. 221.

strike him down am also in the right',[1] he clearly intends us to understand that any conflict of interests will in the end be settled by superior *power*, and that meaningless appeals to 'right' and 'justice' are quite irrelevant to the issue (though of course such appeals may themselves have considerable rhetorical and emotive power when directed towards simple souls); Stirner clearly intends us to understand that *neither* he *nor* the tiger can meaningfully be said to be 'in the right', since the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' are, like all moral concepts, nothing but empty verbal abstractions. The consistent egoist, for whom all such talk 'rests on a religious, that is, false view of things',[2] should presumably drop the terms 'right' and 'wrong' from his vocabulary, except when he cynically employs them as purely tactical weapons for influencing the behaviour of others. Despite his incidental confusions, Stirner remains the consistent egoist, for he remains aware that moral terms are always semantically otiose; the person who sincerely talks the language of morals is suffering from illusions akin to the illusions of the religious believer. 'Who can ask about "right" unless he occupies the religious standpoint? Is not "right" a religious concept, something sacred?'[3]

To say that something is part of my 'property', then, is to *deny* that anyone has any just claims over the thing in question, it is to deny that anyone can ever be 'wronged' by anything I may do to it; and to describe it as my 'property' is also to *assert* that I exercise control over the thing in question, and that I choose to exercise this control. To say that a piece of land is 'mine' is to say that I am in physical possession of it, and that I choose to retain possession of it; and it is also to say that no one is 'entitled' to this piece of land, and that no one can rightly object to whatever I may choose to do with it. I myself have no 'right' to crops from the land, unless I can make them grow from this barren soil; similarly, I have no 'duty' to the land, and may do with it what I please and can. My property only belongs to me so long as I can keep it; but whilst it is mine, it is mine to preserve, to change, or to destroy. 'Property', says Stirner, 'is the expression for *unlimited dominion* over something (thing, beast, man), which "I can com-

[1] D.E., p. 223. [2] D.E., p. 220. [3] D.E., loc. cit.

mand and manage as seems good to me". . . . What I have in my power, that is my own. So long as I assert myself as occupant, I am the proprietor of the thing; if it escapes from me again, no matter by what power, as for example by my recognition of a claim of others to the thing—then the property is extinct. Thus property and possession coincide.'[1]

We have said that the egoist's fundamental existential project is the realization of his distinctive being-in-the-world by assembling and preserving that fluctuating totality of interests which Stirner terms his 'property'. This he does by continuous acts of 'appropriation', in which he employs his power to wrest from his environment the materials for his personal use and enjoyment. His life is continuous appropriation and consumption, continuously replacing the property he has consumed, continuously maintaining a pragmatic equilibrium throughout the fluid, rotating sum of his worldly investments. Now, it must not be thought that it is only things like land, food, money, and so on which are the objects of the egoist's appropriation. Not merely the acquisition of physical objects but *every* activity of the egoist is a kind of 'appropriation'. (In this extension of the concept Stirner strikingly resembles Sartre, for whom also—at least in *Being and Nothingness*—all human activity can be reduced to some form of 'appropriation'.[2]) Stirner speaks of 'proprietary thinking', which appropriates thoughts as 'nourishment for my thinking head, like potatoes for my digesting stomach or a friend for my sociable heart'.[3] The project of 'love', likewise, is for the egoist a project of appropriation: he possesses the beloved as he possesses an object, from which he seeks to extract the last drop of enjoyment for himself. Stirner commonly speaks of establishing his 'property' in other people, frequently comparing his relation to others with that of a gourmet to the food from which he gains both pleasure and life: the egoist 'devours' others—that is, he exploits them without consideration for their own distinct interests—both for the amusement and delight he derives from their company and because the assistance or acquiescence of others is often necessary

[1] D.E., pp. 293–4.

[2] See esp. *Being and Nothingness*. Part Four, ch. 2, sec. II.

[3] D.E., p. 415.

to the advancement of his ulterior schemes and the protection of his personal interests. Stirner would agree with Sartre that the relation of 'possession' is essentially that of a creator to his creatures, but for Stirner the activity of 'creation' (for example, his own creative activity as a writer) is in turn a kind of instantaneous appropriation, whereby the creator procures an existence for his creatures so that they may exist *as* his property: 'I write to procure for *my* thoughts an existence in the world'.[1] Thinking, writing, loving, working, playing, creating—all these and every other activity, when performed by the total egoist, become modes of his one generic activity of appropriation. To live, for the total egoist, is to appropriate, because in the last analysis the total egoist *is* nothing but his property.

For Sartrean existentialism, of course, the project of appropriation always ends in essential failure, since in appropriating something what I am always ultimately seeking is the ideal, and therefore impossible, state of affairs in which my inward subjectivity would gain objective being without loss of its original freedom. Appropriation, according to Sartre, is man's symbolic attempt to win a foundation for his unbearable freedom by installing himself in the kind of massive, inert, secure, self-identical being enjoyed by *objects*, but since I can never literally *become* the objects I possess 'my original desire of being my own foundation for myself is never satisfied through appropriation'.[2] What we fundamentally desire to possess is not this suit of clothes or that house for its own sake, but the *being* which these objects enjoy: what we fundamentally desire to possess is Being-in-itself, and it is because this desire is futile, according to Sartre, that 'man is a useless passion' and 'we lose ourselves in vain'.[3] However, for Stirner, needless to say, the project of egoistic appropriation is not haunted by any such inherent futility. Once again the striking resemblance of Stirner's analysis to that of Sartre runs parallel with an utter discordance between the conclusions of the two thinkers. The Unique One does not seek the eternity, the repose of infinite and absolute being, for he is the

[1] D.E., p. 346.
[2] Sartre, loc. cit.
[3] Sartre, op. cit., Part Four, ch. 2, sec. III.

'transitory, mortal creator' who is in 'constant flux and dissolution' and whose choice is therefore consciously a choice of the relative and the finite. The philosophy of The Unique One is a philosophy of radical finitude. Unlike Sartrean man, he does not covet the perfection of God but accepts himself wholly as he is, with all his shortcomings and limitations. Aware that he can only ever control, use, and enjoy a small fraction of reality, it remains his purpose to preserve and extend his finite property by ceaseless acquisition and self-assertion, incorporating this book, that friend, these paintings, those theories within the fluctuating, contracting and expanding totality which is at once his property and his mode of being-in-the-world. It is true that The Unique One grandiosely declares, 'I am proprietor of the world of things, and I am proprietor of the world of Spirit.'[1] It is true that he says, 'Now I take the world . . . as *mine*, as my property.'[2] By such expressions, however, Stirner obviously does not mean to claim that the whole of reality is his property in the sense that he exercises effective control over everything that exists. He is merely asserting the purely negative proposition (which, as we have seen, is a central element in the concept of 'property' as he understands it), namely that no one else has anything corresponding to a 'rightful claim' over any part of reality, that no one else has a 'prior entitlement' to anything that exists, since the concepts of 'right' and 'entitlement' are simply meaningless verbiage. The Unique One himself does not lay claim to the whole of reality, for his self-affirmation is characteristically an affirmation of himself as consciously transient and incorrigibly finite.[3]

[1] D.E., p. 81. [2] D.E., p. 23.

[3] Stirner's description of himself as 'proprietor of the world' might be understood in yet another sense, still quite distinct from that 'possession of the world' which is the fundamental appropriative project of Sartrean man. Stirner's creative activity as a philosopher might be described as an activity of appropriation, in which the whole of concrete reality is *symbolically* appropriated and converted into the purely metaphysical totality (which we have seen to be an artificially meaningless totality) that is The Unique One's 'world' (which we have seen to be really an anti-world). On this interpretation The Unique One is proprietor of the world in the sense of his private metaphysical system, but he is not literally proprietor of the world in the sense of the sum of brute, given, concrete reality.

There is a second crucial respect in which Stirner's concept of appropriation as The Unique One's fundamental existential project differs from the Sartrean concept of appropriation as the essentially futile project of a hungry consciousness which is doomed to be 'never satisfied'. The Sartrean consciousness not only hungers for being; as a 'nothingness' appalled by its own lack of being it *is* this hunger for being. Just as 'doing' reduces to 'having', so also, according to Sartre, 'having' always reduces to 'being': the project of appropriation is ultimately a project of *being*. In appropriating this paper-knife I am essentially seeking to instal myself in the kind of objective, immanent being enjoyed by the paper-knife, but this is precisely the kind of being which I can *never* enjoy without ceasing to be the transcendent, conscious subject which I necessarily am, and hence the meaning of my original act of appropriation is already doomed. Perpetually and inescapably a 'nothing', according to Sartre, my acts of appropriation signify my attempt to become wholly and permanently *something*, and for this reason they are futile from the start. Now The Unique One, as we have seen in the previous chapter, far from fleeing the nothingness which he is, is on the contrary resolved to live and will his own nothingness, to affirm himself as a truly self-chosen nothingness. In his activity of ceaseless appropriation, then, Stirner's egoist is seeking, not to instal himself in the kind of being enjoyed by the objects he appropriates, but to reduce these objects to the nothingness which he himself originally and ultimately is. This he does above all by *consuming* his property. To consume the tobacco is not to gain for myself the kind of being enjoyed by the tobacco: it is to reduce the tobacco to the kind of being which is *me*, that is, to reduce it to *nothing*, to destroy it. It is in being consumed by me that an object becomes most fully and irrevocably my property. And thus Stirner's egoistic proprietor is most completely himself when he is the consumer, when he dissolves the objects appropriated into his own essential vacuity, when he makes them unalterably his own by destroying them as objects and 'ingesting' them into his voracious subjectivity. Unlike the eternally defeated Sartrean consciousness, whose activity of appropriation symbolizes an eternally vain project of

self-realization, the appropriative activity of The Unique One symbolizes the conscious egoist's perpetual project of self-dissolution and self-destruction. 'From now on', says Stirner, 'the question is not how one is to win life, but how one is to squander, to enjoy it; not how one is to realize one's true self, but how one is to dissolve oneself, to live oneself out. . . . *Enjoyment of life* means using life up . . . consuming it in the way that one uses a candle in consuming it. . . . I enjoy myself according to my own good pleasure. "Life" is of no concern to me, except as something to be *squandered*.'[1]

The nihilistic egoist, then, readily agrees with the Sartrean existentialist that appropriation is and must be futile if it aims at realizing an absolute of being. However, the nihilistic egoist in no way seeks to realize any such absolute of being. His activity of appropriation consists of a finite series of particular confiscations and re-investments, each of which is specifically designed to preserve and enhance that fluid, finite totality which is simultaneously his 'property' and his extant, concrete identity, his being-in-the-world; and this totality is distinctively preserved as a *totality-in-process-of-disintegration*. The egoist's property *is* only in so far as it is a continuous becoming, and it is a 'becoming' only in so far as it is continuously becoming *nothing*. The egoist's enjoyment of his property is his self-enjoyment, which as we have seen is always a self-destruction, since to enjoy is always in the end to destroy. This self-destruction, however, is simply his return to himself. In destroying his property (by consuming it) he is assimilating it to the nothingness which he already is. To 'enjoy himself', for Stirner's egoist, is therefore perpetually to resume his being-in-the-world into the nothingness which he is in-and-for-himself. But to resume something into my inmost nothingness is to make it most completely and irrevocably *my own*, and thus it follows that the egoist's self-enjoyment is one and the same with his *self-possession*.

Unlike existentialist man's 'project of being', which according to Sartre is unrealizable, the egoist's 'self-possession' is instantaneously realized whenever he consciously chooses to possess himself. 'Self-possession is my whole essence and existence, it is I myself',

[1] D.E., pp. 375–6.

says Stirner. '*My own* I am at all times and under all circumstances, if I know how to have myself and do not throw myself away on others.' Stirner contrasts the reality of egoistic self-possession with the specious ideal of freedom. 'Given up as serf to a master, I think only of myself and my advantage; his blows strike me indeed, I am not *free* from them; but I endure them only for *my benefit*, perhaps in order to lull him into a false security by the semblance of patience, or perhaps not to draw worse upon myself by defiance. And, as I keep my eye on myself and my selfishness, I take by the forelock the first good opportunity to trample the slave-owner into the dust. That I then become free from him and his whip is only the result of my prior egoism. Someone might say here that I was "free" even in the condition of slavery—namely, "intrinsically" or "inwardly". But "intrinsically free" is not "really free", and "inwardly" is not "outwardly". On the other hand I was *my own*—self-possessed—wholly and entirely, inwardly and outwardly.'[1]

The egoist's fundamental project, then, is not only in principle realizable: it can be realized 'at all times and under all circumstances'. What it requires is a conscious choice, which is identical with the egoist's choice of himself as The Unique One, to whom the wishes, interests, and 'rights' of others are in the last analysis matters of the profoundest indifference. In fact, The Unique One's self-possession is one and the same with his 'conscious egoism'. Others may be and are natural, instinctive, unreflective egoists, but The Unique One consciously chooses egoism and therefore, unlike others, *he* fully possesses his property, which he never allows to possess *him*: 'Unconsciously and involuntarily we all strive towards self-possession,' says Stirner, 'but what I do unconsciously I only half do.'[2] Moreover, The Unique One's 'conscious egoism' is one and the same with his *nihilistic* egoism. It is because he is conscious of having chosen himself as the egoistic proprietor that he is able to stand aloof from his property, to distinguish himself from it, at the same time as he tenaciously preserves and extends it. The Unique One is a 'nihilistic' egoist because he is always conscious of himself as more than the pro-

[1] D.E., pp. 185–6. [2] D.E., pp. 419–20.

perty with which he is identified, because he forever negates, refuses, and dissolves the property he nevertheless continues to assemble and totalize. As the nothingness who transcends his being-in-the-world, he draws his property into himself by consuming it, that is, by annihilating it. While repudiating the moral claims of others to those objects which he has seized and appropriated, he advances no moral claims on his own behalf over the objects of which he is in possession. If he does not respect the property of others, neither does he 'respect' his own. If he is without respect for others, he is also utterly without self-respect. Since he has consciously chosen to live in a world without value, he does not attribute value to himself or his property. 'Nothing', says Stirner, 'is worth your occupying yourself with it for *its sake*',[1] for if the egoist judged his possessions to be worthwhile for their own sakes, to be intrinsically valuable and meaningful, he would find himself in that measure bound to them, possessed *by them*; indeed he can only be said to 'possess' his possessions so long as they *mean nothing to him*. 'All things are nothing to me', says The Unique One, who preserves himself icily detached from the property he has assembled, that is, from his physical possessions, pursuits, relationships, plans, and beliefs, in short, from the worldly identity he has established. The Unique One, then, is an egoist because ultimately he cares for no one. But if he is distinctively a *nihilistic* egoist, this is because ultimately he may be said to care for nothing.

[1] D.E., p. 409.

CHAPTER XII

PHILOSOPHY AS PLAY

As a piece of literature, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* can be instructively appraised from a variety of standpoints. Stirner's book can be regarded as a tract for his times, a historically instructive commentary on the great ideological debate of the 1840s, written from the inside of the debate by someone closely versed in its manifold shifts and emphases. It can be judged as an exercise in confessional autobiography, the imaginative self-portrait of a profoundly reticent personality, masked in the opaque idiom of an obscure philosophy. It can be evaluated as a deeply suggestive psychiatric document, the unintentional record of a revealing and in some respects typical case-history. And of course, as has been the purpose in the present work, it can also be considered as offering a highly ambitious, panoramic world-view in the traditional metaphysical genre; it can be considered as offering a characteristic pattern of ideas and formulae in terms of which human experience (represented, in this case, by the personal experience of the author) can be comprehensively ordered and assessed.

Clearly, it is as an ambitious metaphysical venture that *Der Einzige* is primarily of interest, for its historical, biographical, and psychiatric relevance would scarcely be intelligible without a prior understanding of the metaphysical claims which the book makes. It cannot be said that *Der Einzige* represents a metaphysical achievement of the highest order. Technically, the book has many faults, not least the extreme vagueness of much of its language, which Stirner himself openly recognized.[1] Stirner's manipulation of concepts is often supple, bold, and ingenious, but his final construction lacks the technical sophistication and logical rigour which some of his more discreet contemporaries were capable of

[1] See, e.g., *Max Stirner's kleinere Schriften*, p. 413.

deploying in their less spectacular undertakings. Stirner was far from being a great metaphysician. Audacity is no substitute for sheer professional skill. In comparison with the system of Hegel, or even with that of Feuerbach, the system of *Der Einzige* is a conceptually stark and limited creation. It lacks the fluent complexity, combined with demonstrative cogency, in which the best metaphysical systems are rich. Yet, for all its dialectical shortcomings, its bald *ex cathedra* pronouncements, its sanguine disregard of logical procedure, Stirner's book remains startlingly effective as the single-minded presentation of an uncompromising world-view, and it is as an openly metaphysical world-view that it must finally be judged. Stirner, of course, did not set out to sculpt a monumental edifice which would impose its truth upon all men; he did not propose a system of unifying generalizations which would illuminate our public moral experience and define our common situation: the world-picture which he presents is a purely personal statement, but it is one which nevertheless needs to be critically appraised, its general relevance clarified, and its metabolism exposed to logical scrutiny. In *Der Einzige* Stirner has constructed a metaphysical system, such as it is, of which The Unique One is the central figure. What is the nature of this metaphysical system? In constructing it, what precisely does Stirner conceive himself to be doing? What claims does it make, and how seriously should they be taken? What is its status, what is its validity, as an intellectual enterprise? Stirner himself does not explicitly consider these questions. Indeed, it would be a mistake to suppose that they ever occurred to him in this form. However, from what he says in passing about his own activity as a thinker and about his relationship to his philosophy, it requires little imagination to devise the kind of answers he would almost certainly have given to such broad epistemological questions.

'Thinking' (by which is primarily signified philosophical thinking) must not, according to Stirner, be regarded as an autonomous, impersonal, wholly objective and external process, a formal dance of Platonic ideas in which the particular, concrete thinker can only join to the extent that he meekly conforms to the official patterns already established among these independently

subsisting concepts. Philosophical ideas do not follow a logical evolution of their own, according to which they live or die in cool disregard of the human beings who employ them, and to suppose that they do is to fall victim to the Hegelian superstition of conceptual absolutism. There is no self-governing republic of concepts, with its own laws and standards. One idea does not follow from another in the abstract: the logical sequence of ideas presupposes the active human thinker, for it is *he* who establishes the conventions, the logical canons, inferential requirements, licences, and prohibitions, without which the very concept of a 'logical sequence' could not arise. 'Before my thinking there is—I. From this it follows that my thinking is not preceded by a *thought*, or that my thinking is without a "presupposition". For the presupposition which I am for my thinking is not one *made by thinking*, not one *thought of*, but it is *posited* thinking *itself*, it is the *proprietor* of the thought, and this proves only that thinking is nothing more than—*property*, and that an "autonomous" thinking, a "Spirit of Thought", in no way exists.'[1]

There is a certain ambiguity in this passage, and in other such passages, which perhaps requires to be clarified. Stirner is not merely asserting the truism that, for example, my particular act of thinking about God at this moment presupposes my existence as the thinker without whom this particular psychological event would not have occurred. He is making a much more radical assertion: namely that *the concept thought of* has no existence apart from its being-thought-by myself as its thinker, from whom it derives whatever character and meaning it possesses. Metaphysical concepts like 'God', and the propositions in which they figure ('God is the self-caused Cause of all things'), are not self-subsistent abstract entities but convenient human artefacts, to be utilized, modified, compounded, and discarded, as their artificer chooses. Stirner is in fact asserting a radical nominalism. In themselves concepts are nothing but words:[2] far from being endowed with an inherent meaning, which their user must scrupulously observe, their whole meaning derives from the use to which they are put. Thus Stirner is asserting a radically *pragmatic* nominalism.

[1] D.E., pp. 411–12.

[2] 'Word and thought coincide.' D.E., p. 416.

'The truth is dead, a letter, a word, a material which I can use up. All truth by itself is dead, a corpse; it is alive only in the same way as my lungs are alive, namely in the measure of my own vitality. Truths are material like vegetables and weeds; as to whether vegetable or weed, the decision lies in me.'[1] Of course, failing to recognise that concepts are nothing but their docile instruments, which they are free to use as they judge expedient, individuals frequently suffer a profound alienation at the hands of language; instead of dominating words, an individual may allow words to dominate him, and so may be led to betray his own interests. When there is a conflict between my own interests and those of others, for example, these others may appeal to the concepts of 'personal liberty', 'human dignity', 'family responsibility', 'economic efficiency', and soon, in an attempt to stigmatize my actions as 'unreasonable' or 'unjust'. But if concepts do not lead a spontaneous, independent life in an ethereal realm of their own, 'flying around free like birds',[2] neither do they bear a uniform signification indelibly stamped upon them by 'Society' (which is itself an empty abstraction); I am not obliged to use concepts like 'liberty' and 'justice' in the specific tendentious ways approved by the 'normal' practice of 'the ordinary body of language-users' (for it is I myself who settle what meaning, if any, I shall attach to the concept of 'obligation'). Ethical and philosophical concepts are always used tendentiously: if the members of some group, however inclusive, agree to use a concept in some tendentious way which serves their general convenience, then I can decide, in a polemical context, to use the concept in question in the particular tendentious way which best serves *my* convenience. Stirner's nominalism transpires to be a radically *individualistic* nominalism.

We see, then, that Stirner's 'thinking'—that is, the system of propositions asserted by him in *Der Einzige*—represents, like all other forms of his egoistic activity, a species of *appropriation.* In his metaphysical identity as The Unique One he retrospectively stamps the metaphysical system over which he presides as his 'property', in the full sense which he throughout gives to this term. Since to say that something is part of my property is to

[1] D.E., pp. 414–15. [2] D.E., p. 400.

deny that anyone has any just claims over the thing in question, to deny that anyone can ever be wronged by anything I may do to it, it follows that the concepts incorporated by Stirner into his system (commandeered, many of them, from the systems of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Bauer) are his to do with as he pleases, without necessarily observing the precise conventions jealously established by their original authors to safeguard the chastity of their conceptual offspring. 'Your thoughts are *my* thoughts, which I dispose of as I will . . . they are my property, which I annihilate as pleases me, without waiting for authorization from you first. . . . It does not matter to me that you also call these thoughts yours, for they remain mine nevertheless, and how I deal with them is *my affair*.'[1]

The central concepts administered by Stirner in *Der Einzige* are concepts like 'uniqueness', 'property', 'power', 'nothingness', 'the sacred'—to name only those which occupy a key role in his construction. These concepts are the units from which he has constructed the network of mutually reflecting, mutually supporting propositions of which his metaphysical system consists. Thus, given his 'absolute dominion' over the original concepts from which his distinctive propositions are formed (and, it must be recalled, these also include such logical concepts as 'truth' and 'falsehood'), both the characteristic meaning and, if he chooses, the formal *truth* of his metaphysical propositions are his alone to settle, without reference to any 'alien' standard, that is, without reference to anything outside his own unconstrained choice. This, presumably, is what Stirner intends to assert when he declares that his 'thoughts' are his personal 'property'. His metaphysical beliefs are his personal property in the sense that he is not responsible to anyone for what he believes, and that he believes only what he freely chooses to believe. And what applies to his metaphysical beliefs also applies to his moral, political, and economic beliefs, and to the whole range of miscellaneous value-judgments in terms of which his metaphysical beliefs become translated into concrete practical postures. There can be no question of justifying his beliefs, either in the eyes of others, or

[1] D.E., loc. cit.

before the bar of reason. 'If reason rules, the *person* succumbs', says Stirner.[1] There can be no good reason for holding any particular set of metaphysical or moral beliefs whatsoever. In his extreme stress on the irrelevance of all rational considerations to the individual who is seeking to establish his fundamental view of the world and his own relationship to it, Stirner obviously comes very close to the ideas of some modern existentialists, who also stress that a person's fundamental beliefs cannot be assured to him by logic or determined for him by scientific procedures but must be freely chosen and actively willed.[2] The facts of experience cannot justify his metaphysical world-view, for it is his world-view which determines how he will assimilate the facts of his experience. For these existentialists and for Stirner, an individual's basic metaphysical position is in the end strictly unjustifiable. And in Stirner's words: 'Justified or unjustified—that does not concern me.'[3]

We saw in the last chapter that The Unique One's property represents his distinctive mode of being-in-the-world but that, as the nothingness who transcends his own being-in-the-world, The Unique One is always conscious of himself as *more than* the objective aggregate of his property, from which he is always able to distinguish himself, from which he always remains essentially detached, and which he is therefore always able to negate, refuse, and dissolve. Now, as a metaphysician, the egoistic proprietor likewise transcends the metaphysical beliefs which are part of his property. 'A "thought" is something finished, something which has been thought and from which I constantly distinguish myself,

[1] D.E., p. 126.

[2] This theme has perhaps been sounded most frequently and unequivocally by Christian existentialists, from Kierkegaard to Bultmann, and clearly Christians have additional reasons of their own for depreciating the role of reason (and exalting that of faith) in determining our most fundamental and crucial beliefs; nevertheless this emphasis on the individual's personal responsibility for his fundamental belief or disbelief, which he has in a real sense chosen, is also characteristic of atheistic existentialism, although in different ways and in different degrees. The impossibility of proving our fundamental moral and metaphysical views by logical or scientific procedures has, of course, also been stressed in recent times by positivistic schools of one kind or another.

[3] D.E., p. 245.

as does the creator from the creature, the father from the son. Both from the thoughts which I have thought, and from those which I shall think, I distinguish myself just as certainly; the ones are now objects to me, the others—eggs as yet unlaid'.[1] As proprietor of his beliefs, the egoist never allows them to ossify into 'fixed ideas': he never allows them to grow into sacrosanct dogmas, which he must not question or alter and of which he would therefore have become the prisoner. 'Every judgment which I pass on an object is the *creature* of my will, and the recognition of this again shows me that I must not lose myself in the *creature*, the judgment, but remain the *creator*, the judge, who is forever creating anew. All predicates of objects are my depositions, my judgements, my *creatures*. If they want to tear themselves loose from me and be something for themselves, or actually overawe me, then I have nothing more pressing to do than to take them back into their nothingness, that is, into me, the creator. God, Christ, Trinity, Morality, The Good, etc., are such creatures, of which I must not merely allow myself to say that they are truths, but also that they are deceptions. As I once willed and decreed their existence, so I want to have the licence to will their non-existence too; I must not let them grow over my head, must not have the weakness to let them become something "absolute", whereby they would be eternalized and withdrawn from my power and decision. With that I should fall prey to the *principle of stability*, the proper life-principle of religion, which concerns itself with creating "inviolable sanctuaries", "eternal truths"—in short, that which shall be "sacred"—and depriving you of what is *yours*.'[2]

Because the egoistic metaphysician remains essentially above and distinct from his metaphysical system, which he has created as a vehicle of his egoistic purpose, he is always at liberty to 'destroy' any part of his system which does not satisfactorily serve this purpose. '*I*, from whom I start, am not a thought, nor does my essence consist in thinking. Against me, the unnamable, the realm of concepts, thought, and Spirit is shattered.'[3] In effect this means that he reserves the liberty to delete, truncate, amend,

[1] *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 403–4. [2] D.E., pp. 394–5. [3] D.E., p. 175.

transpose, or replace any proposition or set of propositions which no longer fulfils the purely aesthetic function assigned to it in the egoist's overriding purpose of self-enjoyment and self-display. It is these purely aesthetic considerations which dictate the terms of The Unique One's metaphysical system, not considerations of ideological orthodoxy, conceptual economy, fidelity to fact, or even formal logical consistency. 'Whether what I think and do is Christian, what do I care? Whether it is human, liberal, humane, whether unhuman, illiberal, inhuman, what do I ask about that? If it only accomplishes what I want, if only I satisfy myself in it, then overlay it with predicates as you will; it is all alike to me. Perhaps I too, in the very next moment, will defend myself against my former thoughts; I too may well change suddenly my mode of action; but not because it does not correspond to Christianity, not because it runs counter to the eternal rights of man, not because it flies in the face of mankind, humanity, and humanitarianism, but—because I am no longer all in it, because it no longer furnishes me a full enjoyment, because I doubt the earlier thought or no longer please myself in the mode of action just now practised. Just as the world as property has become a *material* with which I undertake what I will, so too Spirit as property must sink down into a *material* before which I no longer entertain any sacred dread. . . . No thought is sacred, for let no thought rank as "devotional", no feeling is sacred (no sacred feeling of friendship, mother's feelings, etc.), no belief is sacred. They are all disposable, my disposable property, and are annihilated as they are created by *me*.'[1]

Clearly, such a view of the nature of metaphysical thinking would make it less appropriate to speak of 'the metaphysical intellect' than of the metaphysical *imagination*. Like the works of the imagination, which may well enlighten but must first of all contrive to please, Stirner's metaphysical construction is first and foremost designed to *gratify* its author: it is a project of self-gratification. A proposition which no longer pleases, therefore, can and will be discarded. When the activity of thinking ceases to gratify, it can and will be discontinued. 'It stands with this as

[1] D.E., pp. 418–19.

with any other piece of work, which you can give up when the humour for it wears off.'[1] The egoistic metaphysician is no tireless seeker after truth, tenaciously grappling with philosophical problems until their solution is in sight and heroically carrying the burden of his intellectual commitment without thought of self; he does not know what it is like to be confronted by an intellectual problem which demands his single-minded, unremitting attention, which fascinates him and holds him in its grip. 'Nothing must occupy us with which *we* do not occupy ourselves', says Stirner. 'One only needs know how to "put everything out of mind", if only to be able to--go to sleep.'[2]

In modern times Western philosophy has produced many ideologies which have been frankly irrationalist, some of them sober and temperate ideologies which subordinate intellectual values in general to certain moral and social values deemed to be of paramount importance, some of them brutal affirmations of the supremacy of will, instinct, power, but all of them subordinating the pursuit of objective truth to the pursuit of some other concrete interest, some other value which eclipses intellectual values and in the service of which the latter must be enrolled. The form of irrationalism Stirner is here expounding must be one of the most blatantly cynical. In every phase of his 'thinking', the egoist keeps before himself only his own interests, his comfort, his self-satisfaction. Metaphysical thinking, which in general serves no important material purpose, is to be undertaken purely for such pleasure as the egoist may happen to derive from this singular activity and for such aesthetic relish as he may derive from contemplating the conceptual artefact which is its end-product. To continue playing this private game when it had begun to become tedious or vexatious would be patently absurd, and in any case nothing forces him to do so. 'A jerk does me the service of the most careful thinking, a stretch of the limbs frees me from the torment of thoughts, a leap upward hurls from my breast the nightmare of the religious world, a rousing huzza throws off year-long burdens.'[3] The solemn rationalists, who take their metaphysical problems with soul-searching earnestness, will

[1] D.E., p. 480. [2] See D.E., pp. 391–2. [3] D.E., p. 175.

criticize such 'crudeness and frivolity'. Stirner's answer is: 'But have you tasks if you do not set yourself them? So long as you set them you will not give them up, and I certainly do not care if you think, and, thinking, create a thousand thoughts. But you who have set the tasks, are you not to be able to throw them over again? Must you be bound to these tasks, and must they become absolute tasks?'[1] Metaphysical 'problems' are not to be taken seriously. Within any game problems will arise, generated by the very terms of the game to which the players themselves have assented, which they have perhaps even themselves invented; indeed it is of the very nature of most games to generate such problems, in the solution of which much of the intrinsic pleasure of the game consists; but it is also true that the whole point of a game is that the participants freely choose to play it, that they play it primarily for their own amusement, and that they will normally cease to play it when the game has ceased to amuse. If metaphysical 'thinking' is essentially a game in which symbols are manipulated to produce an aesthetically pleasing verbal edifice, the problems it generates may deeply interest but must not be allowed to oppress or disquiet its player, to 'possess' him, for the egoist is not only or primarily a thinker. He always can (and always eventually will) become 'thoughtless'; that is, he can, and will, cease to play this particular game. 'The possessed man . . . wants to dissolve thoughts by means of thoughts,' says Stirner, 'but I say that only thoughtlessness truly saves me from thoughts. Not thought, but thoughtlessness—I myself, the unthinkable and incomprehensible—will restore me to possession of myself.'[2]

Thus the egoistic metaphysician does not know what it is to work with a sense of profound intellectual responsibility. The thinking of The Unique One, like all his conduct, is wholly arbitrary. His relationship to his philosophical ideas, like his relationship to the rest of his property, is strictly irresponsible. 'Proprietary thinking' is diametrically opposed to what Stirner calls 'free thinking', that is, the kind of thinking in which the philosopher is committed to follow the free movement of ideas, to 'follow the argument wherever it may lead' in a spirit of high

[1] D.E., p. 176. [2] D.E., p. 175.

seriousness and perfect disinterestedness, the kind of thinking in which the *ideas*, regarded as spontaneous, self-propelling realities, may be free but in which the *thinker*, commissioned to study and faithfully record the movements of these noumenal realities, is most certainly subservient and bound. 'To the thinker his thinking is a "sublime labour, a sacred activity", and it rests on a firm *faith*, the faith in Truth. At first praying is a sacred activity, then this sacred "devotion" passes over into a rational and reasoning "thinking", which, however, likewise retains its underangeable basis of faith, and is nothing more than a wonderful machine which the Spirit of Truth harnesses in its service. Free thinking and free knowledge put *me* to work—for it is not I that am free, not *I* who put myself to work, but thinking is free and puts me to work. . . .'[1] Whereas Stirner's proprietary thinker never forgets that he is a whole man, with physical, economic, and emotional needs and interests, the self-styled 'pure thinker', in his attempt to pursue impersonal Truth without regard to its effect upon his other interests, is in fact treating his whole being as a means to what is merely one part of his being: his intellectual interests have become an obsession, and he himself has become a fanatic. 'The thinker is blind to the immediacy of things, and incapable of mastering them: he does not eat, does not drink, does not enjoy; for the eater and drinker is never the thinker, indeed the latter forgets about eating and drinking, his getting on in life, the cares of nourishment, etc., over his thinking; he forgets it as the praying man too forgets it. This is why he appears to the forceful son of nature as a ridiculous crank, a *fool*—even if he does look upon him as holy, just as lunatics appeared so to the ancients. Free thinking is lunacy, because it is *the pure movement of inwardness*, of the merely *inward man*, which guides and rules the rest of the man.'[2]

'Totally different from this *free* thinking', says Stitner, 'is *proprietary* thinking, *my* thinking, a thinking which does not lead me but is directed, continued, or broken off by me at my pleasure.'[3] Idealist metaphysicians like Hegel and materialist metaphysicians like Feuerbach are all 'struck fast' in the same illusion, since they

[1] D.E., pp. 396–7. [2] D.E., p. 397. [3] D.E., loc. cit

all seek to discover, in and by thought, an absolute of being; but this 'absolute of being' which they seek is an unreal abstraction, for it is itself merely a thought, and in seeking it by absolutizing thought they only succeed in making themselves the deluded prisoners of their own metaphysical activity. 'Absolute thought is nothing but that thinking which forgets that it is *my* thinking, that *I* think, and that it only exists through *me*. But I, as ego, swallow up again what is mine, and am its master; it is only my judgment, which I can at any moment *change*, i.e. annihilate, take back into myself, and consume.'[1] The metaphysics of the proprietary thinker does not claim to be a 'reasonable' metaphysics, for its author does not claim to be a 'rational' thinker. 'If I am free as "rational I", then the rational in me, or Reason, is free; and this freedom of Reason, or freedom of the thought . . . is at the same time the most merciless precedence or domination of the thought. If thoughts are free, I am their slave.'[2] The metaphysics of the proprietary thinker does not even claim to be fully intelligible, for it is only partly an act of human communication. We have seen that the proprietary thinker does not bind himself to use concepts according to the norms established for these concepts by those who 'normally' use them; he is not bound to honour the conventions observed by 'the ordinary body of language-users'; and, in any case, what he has to say is in the end quite incommunicable, since The Unique One, whose act of self-designation *Der Einzige* is, designates himself as the being for whom 'this poor devil of language lacks a word'[3] and whose being is therefore literally 'unspeakable'. 'If the point is to make myself intelligible, to communicate, then assuredly I can make use only of *human* means, which are at my command because I am at the same time man. And really I have thoughts only as *man*; as I, I am at the same time *thoughtless*. He who cannot rid himself of thoughts is to that extent still *merely* a man, still the slave of that human institution, language, that treasury of human thoughts. Language or "the word" tyrannizes hardest over us, because it brings up against us a whole army of fixed ideas.'[4] To escape from the bland preconceptions, the dogmatic and pervasive if

[1] D.E., p. 398. [2] D.E., pp. 404–5. [3] D.E., p. 215. [4] D.E., p. 405.

tacit assumptions, of one's thinking, language-using neighbours involves escaping from the modes of reasoning and the linguistic protocols in which these hidden preconceptions are enshrined.

It might well seem that Stirner's account of his own activity as a metaphysician in effect constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of his metaphysical system. It might well seem that, in his perverse insistence on utter privacy, his explicit repudiation of objective rational procedures, and his arrogant indifference to the standard meanings of the concepts he employs, he has in effect destroyed any claims to general validity, or even to general interest, which his metaphysical system might otherwise have enjoyed. How seriously are we to take a philosophy whose author, on his own avowal, will take no pains to bring coherence and intelligibility into his system, whose author refuses to be troubled by such incidental deficiencies and prefers to escape, with 'a stretch of the limbs', into sublime 'thoughtlessness' whenever the intellectual problems generated by his statements threaten to become vexatious?

Perhaps indeed the answer is that we are not intended to take Stirner's philosophy 'scriously'. In *Der Einzige* Stirner celebrates frivolity, irresponsibility, scepticism and irreverence towards all things, and he does not seek to exempt himself from the eruption of absurdity over which he presides. Perhaps The Unique One implicitly acknowledges that, since all things are absurd, his own philosophy of the Absurd is equally an absurdity. (The very paradoxes generated by this type of self-reference would illustrate and confirm its absurdity.) In combating 'the spirit of seriousness', in reducing all things to absurdity, perhaps he implicitly submits his own reductive activity to this 'reduction to absurdity'.

This interpretation of Stirner's purpose is reinforced by the many passages in which he describes his philosophy as essentially something to be manipulated for his personal recreation and enjoyment—that is, as essentially a *plaything*. 'For I, when I criticize. . . . am only manufacturing a form of self-satisfaction, amusing myself according to my taste; according to my need I chew the thing up or only inhale its odour.'[1] Certainly, Stirner's

[1] D.E., p. 412.

own account of his philosophical activity attributes to it many features which strikingly resemble the distinctive features of 'play'. Play is the paradigm of a free act:[1] a person normally chooses to engage in play, not because he is compelled to do so or because the play-activity is a necessary means for gaining some ulterior end, but purely and simply because he elects to spend this portion of time in this way. Thus play shares with The Unique One's philosophy the quality of *gratuitousness*, and like that philosophy it is also strictly *irresponsible*. Of course a professional player is responsible to his employers, and of course many amateur players feel a general obligation to improve their performance, which they judge by reference to a set of allegedly objective standards: but the true player is not a professional (Stirner was not a professional philosopher), or at least in so far as he is a true player his play is not governed by professional considerations; while the felt obligation to improve his standard of play is only an 'obligation' in the weakest, least coercive sense, since no real obligation is violated if on some occasion the player falls below his usual standard of performance. (In any case, the concept of a purely private game—if this is a possible concept—implies that the standards of performance are set by its inventor and sole player, who ultimately surpasses or falls below them by his own free choice.)

According to Sartre, 'play is an act or series of acts in which, disregarding the rules of the world, one follows self-made rules in some sort of artificial world'.[2] This artificial 'world' depends for its temporary and fragile existence upon the gratuitous choice of the free player, who through it manifests his creativity in a peculiarly pure and personal form; and because he is the creator of this personal world in which he plays, his activity of playing is at the same time an assertion of his *transcendence*, his perpetual escape from the game in which he discovers himself but in which he refuses to lose himself. To play is to posit the permanent possibility of escaping from the game one is playing, just as to create is to posit one's independence of one's creation: the

[1] See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, ch. 2, sec. II.

[2] W. Desan, *The Tragic Finale*, ch. 5, sec. III.

transcendence of the creator consists in his perpetual escape from his creation. Yet because it creates its own distinctive setting or 'world', the activity of play is also peculiarly *self-contained*; the player moves within a circle of reference in terms of which every relevant issue may be ideally resolved, and while the game is in progress it generates its own magic whereby external reality in all its aspects—every workaday, utilitarian, 'serious' consideration—is automatically and completely excluded as the player expends his consciousness upon the game in hand: although he can always escape from the world of the game because it is a world which he has freely chosen, the game is itself an escape from the demands of the external world, of which the player, for the time being at least, ideally refuses to take cognizance. Except incidentally, the game does not serve any ulterior purpose, and the activity of play does not require to be justified in terms of any end external to itself; play is self-contained in the sense that the player engages in it, not in order to satisfy some given and prior need, but purely because of the satisfaction inherent in the activity of play itself.

Now, it is evident that Stirner's activity as a metaphysical 'thinker' corresponds to the activity of play in all these characteristic respects. *Der Einzige* may be thought of as the private game of its solitary author, who through it manifests his creativity by manipulating his personal system of concepts without regard either to the canons of impersonal logic or to the harsh facts of his objective situation. Stirner does not consider himself to be bound to the doctrines of *Der Einzige*, or committed to the propositions therein expressed: even his affirmation of egoism, *as* an affirmation, is at last said to be no more than a 'phrase', a manner of speaking.[1] With an ironic enjoyment of paradox, he always describes himself as remaining above and beyond the descriptions he gives of himself. He always leaves open an escape-route from the compromising metaphysical game he has chosen to play. And of course in his subjective metaphysical identity as 'The Unique One', he may conversely be thought of as escaping from his concrete, literal, public identity as the modest, frugal high-school teacher of limited means and achievement. (Certainly Marx

[1] See *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 365–6.

thought of Stirner's work as escapist is this sense.) Like a game, the metaphysical system of *Der Einzige* is not designed to satisfy the demands of the external world, for it is created solely for the aesthetic pleasure its author takes in creating it. It does not describe the world as it actually is; it does not advance the interests of mankind; it does not profess to enlighten or edify its readers; it does not even purport to serve the material interests of its author. 'I sing as the bird sings, which on the bough alights,' says Stirner, quoting Goethe. 'The song that from me springs is pay which well requites.'[1] 'But,' he adds to his readers, 'I *use* you in all this because I—need ears.'[2]

It seems, then, that the metaphysical system of *Der Einzige* is a private game of a very specific kind. For Stirner, to philosophize is to 'sing'. Like F. A. Lange and some other writers who have tried to render the peculiar quality of metaphysical thinking, Stirner seems to regard the activity of the metaphysician as analogous to that of the poet. Certainly, like the poet, he is engaged in constructing a work of verbal artifice in which he seeks to accomplish self-delivery through a free act of self-expression. More generally, *Der Einzige* might be said to be analogous to a work of art which the artist has undertaken purely for his own gratification and self-commemoration. Of course the creative, artistic purposes behind Stirner's metaphysical system, and its self-fulfilling, purely recreative aspects, are logically distinct. The activity of creation and the activity of play may both be forms of appropriation, but not all creation is a form of play (e.g. the creation of tools in order to perform workaday tasks), and it is by no means the case that all play involves an act of creation (e.g. dancing, most sports, most children's games, which do not produce a final artefact for subsequent contemplation and enjoyment). However, there are many types of play which are essentially creative in the sense required. A child in class may be simply 'playing with his pencil', or he may be playing with his pencil in the distinctive way which produces a 'doodle'; to play with snow may be to build a snowman; to play with a meccano set is to build a model bridge or tower. The complex game which

[1] D.E., p. 347. [2] D.E., loc. cit.

Stirner is playing with and for himself is essentially creative in this sense. It is the private game of an artist whose artistry expresses itself in the form of an imaginative and grandiloquent self-portrait, which he installs at the very centre of an aesthetically reconstituted 'world' to accommodate and illumine it; the whole project, however, having been originally undertaken from the purest motives of self-gratification and self-release. Like creative art generally, in many forms of creative play there is a large element of fantasy. As in many children's games, the player may express himself by donning a fantastic identity. His game may become a 'play' in the dramatic sense, and he may set himself an imaginary role to enact. Or—as Stirner does in portraying his fantastic identity as 'The Unique One'—instead of literally acting out his imaginary role in a series of overt physical actions within a concrete (if imaginatively transformed) physical and social setting, he may prefer to enshrine his fantasy within the safe and prosaic pages of a printed book. In this case the specific artistic game which he is playing is presumably that of the writer of autobiographical fiction. It is clearly arguable that *Der Einzige*, despite its philosophical terminology and its apparent pretensions to dialectical cogency, is essentially a work of autobiographical fiction.

Poetry, art, self-dramatization, autobiographical fiction—these classifications are to some extent overlapping, and in any case the precise artistic genre to which one assigns *Der Einzige* is a matter of secondary importance. If the foregoing analysis is correct, what is chiefly relevant is that the whole philosophical project realized in *Der Einzige* can only be judged as a form of private play (which amounts to saying that it cannot really be judged at all) and that the factors governing Stirner's realization of his philosophical project are purely aesthetic (which invalidates any 'philosophical' criticisms based on considerations of logical consistency or fidelity to human experience). The materials used by Stirner in his metaphysical game are '*words*, nothing but words'.[1] Just as within the game of chess carved pieces of wood are accorded the conventional status of 'Kings' or 'pawns', so within the language-game of metaphysics certain combinations of words are accorded

[1] D.E., p. 406.

the conventional status of 'truths'. 'Truths are phrases, manners of speaking, words; brought into connection, or into an articulate series, they form logic, science, philosophy.'[1] Like any other literary craftsman, Stirner is engaged in assembling words to form appropriate sentences, from which he gradually constructs a complex but unified verbal edifice, to be at last sealed by his approval and stamped with his consenting signature. But unlike other literary craftsmen, his attention is throughout *exclusively* directed to the words he is manipulating; he does not look up from his sentences to ascertain their relevance to the world they purport to describe, or even to determine their applicability to the writer whose self-regard they purport to express; throughout his creative activity, the considerations uppermost in his mind are *purely* aesthetic, purely internal to the linguistic game he is obsessively playing; and his final approval of the complete product which is *Der Einzige* is studiously reserved, a reserve which he symbolizes by appending a characteristically pseudonymous signature.

Nevertheless, the verbal edifice which Stirner has constructed *purports* to offer a picture of the author (as the 'unique proprietor') and of the world he inhabits (as his 'sole property'). It purports to be an exposition and defence of 'conscious egoism', and Stirner's readers might well feel that they are entitled to pass judgment on the truth or falsity of the egoistic system therein depicted. It would seem, however, that to interrogate Stirner's system in this way, to raise the question of its 'objective truth or falsity', would be to raise a strictly senseless question. If Stirner's metaphysical activity is essentially a form of self-indulgence, if it is essentially a form of sheer verbal play, the question of its objective truth or falsity can scarcely arise. Naturally, in the course of his metaphysical game he commonly frames propositions which formally resemble the straightforwardly meaningful propositions of logicians, theologians, psychologists, historians, moralists and others who use language to describe, explain, or evaluate. (This is what is meant by saying that *Der Einzige* 'purports' to describe the world and the author's place in it. Many forms of play are

[1] D.E., p. 407.

characteristically imitative, to the extent that the fantasies enacted in and through them closely resemble the actual behaviour of serious men purposefully engaged in the real world's tasks. Clearly, however, while the activities of the playing child may purport to be those of a policeman, they are not to be finally judged by the standards used in judging actual police work.) Naturally, too, since it is this kind of a game he is distinctively playing, the terms 'true' and 'false' figure among the verbal counters with which he is playing. It must, however, be always borne in mind that for Stirner the egoist's 'truths' are 'true' only in so far as they serve his egoistic purposes—in the case of metaphysical 'truths' only in so far as they serve his purpose of self-gratification and self-display. They receive their status as 'truths' only within the terms of his chosen system. Until this status is artificially conferred upon it, until it is appropriated as a significant counter within his metaphysical game, a literally true proposition simply exists as a brute natural object and its literal truth 'is in vain, because it has its *value*, not *in itself*, but in me; *for itself* it is *worthless:* the truth is a—*creature*'.[1]

To pronounce a proposition 'true' is thus to award it a certain status, to dignify it in a certain way. It is arguable that every use of the word 'true' includes this element of positive appraisal,[2] and that it is this honorific element which unifies the widely varying applications of the word in different contexts—factual, purely formal, practical, and so on—demanding widely different criteria. Thus the criteria on which a proposition is pronounced 'true' in a particular context may be correspondence-to-fact, formal coherence within a body of previously accepted propositions, or even pragmatic utility; but in any context whatsoever to pronounce a proposition 'true' is at least to characterize it as 'worthy of being asserted'. If, as is presumably the case, at least this residual element of positive appraisal is retained in Stirner's application of the term to the axial propositions of his metaphysical system, then to this extent his use of the term is not completely vacuous. Nevertheless it remains completely arbitrary,

[1] D.E., p. 415.

[2] See, e.g., A. R. White, 'Truth as Appraisal', in *Mind*, vol. lxvi.

for the criterion on which he designates a proposition as 'true' remains his own unguided whim, that is to say, a total absence of criteria. It cannot be said that his criterion is formal coherence according to the rules of his system, if this system is a studied exercise in incoherence and if its architectonic is itself a vulnerable product of his whim. And to say that his truth-criteria are purely aesthetic, in the sense relevant to his acknowledged activity of aesthetic play, is of course to say no more than that his judgments of metaphysical truth and falsehood are all rooted in his undecipherable resolve to amuse himself in this specific way.

If, however, the concept of 'truth' as it is applied to particular statements within Stirner's metaphysical system is a purely nominal and honorific concept; and if the interpretation of the whole system as essentially the product of a private verbal game renders the question of the whole system's objective truth or falsehood a strictly senseless question; how then are we to evaluate *Der Einzige* as (what it indeed purports to be) the self-portrait of the nihilistic egoist in the figure of The Unique One? Stirner's system is riddled with paradoxes of self-reference, and the system as a whole might be said to enshrine a version of the 'paradox of the liar'. Is there any sense in which the metaphysical system resulting from his philosophical activity can be taken seriously, if—in terms of the system itself—this original activity is designated as ultimately frivolous? We can of course try to ignore Stirner's own account of his activity, treating the metaphysical system, the exposition and defence of nihilistic egoism, as an independent object of our direct study. We can seek to evaluate it in terms of its inner consistency and its relevance to our experience, for the utterances of a self-confessed liar may yet be credible on these independent grounds, while of course receiving no support from his own testimony. Perhaps, in the course of his frivolous verbal game, Stirner has incidentally produced a vivid and illuminating portrait of the nihilistic egoist, for many a truth may be unconsciously acted out in the medium of fantasy.

However, such attempts to evaluate *Der Einzige* by dint of ignoring one of its central and most significant features, although logically justifiable, are bound to distort and impoverish the

existential project which the book embodies. The book is indeed a self-portrait of the nihilistic egoist, but one of the features portrayed (without which the portrait would not be complete) is precisely its subject's and author's determination to portray himself as he pleases, without regard to objective standards of accuracy or perspective. To portray the nihilistic egoist truthfully is to portray someone without regard for truthfulness. It would seem to follow that a *self*-portrait of the nihilistic egoist, if it is going to have any pretensions to verisimilitude, is bound to disclaim all pretensions to verisimilitude; and, accordingly, that any attempted evaluation which refuses to take account of the self-portraitist's studied disregard of objective accuracy is bound to be invalidated from the start.

The metaphysical system of *Der Einzige* must therefore be evaluated as a whole or not at all. Perhaps to evaluate it as a whole is to conclude that it cannot really be judged at all. Is it to be expected that a nihilistic egoist, as Stirner portrays him, would portray himself as Stirner portrays himself? Is it to be expected that a rapacious, serpentine, evasive, ruthlessly self-centred and self-destructive man would publicly portray himself as someone with these qualities? Perhaps the answer is that if he were to do so he would do so in precisely the manner that Stirner has chosen, pseudonymously, and with the reiterated warning that his word—and implicitly his own self-description—is not to be taken seriously. To depict himself and his world in such a way would be at once to gratify his passion for self-display through metaphysical artifice and to disarm, or at least bewilder, those from whose disfavour he had most to fear. The German police authorities in fact found *Der Einzige* 'too absurd' for their severer notice, a judgment in which contemporary philosophical opinion rapidly concurred.

In Chapter X it was argued that in *Der Einzige* Stirner is attempting to realize, in existential terms, the outcome of a truly self-consistent nihilism; and that he attempts to do so by portraying, on the one hand, the self-centred and self-destructive personality of the nihilistic egoist, The Unique One, and, on the other hand, by depicting the barren, meaningless nihilistic

'world' against which, as background, the figure of the nihilistic egoist projects himself. It was further argued that the 'world' of the nihilistic egoist is a world which he has himself 'created', in the sense that he has transfigured the brute, meaningless data of his original, natural experience, by a metaphysical conversion, into that deliberately brutal and artificially meaningless construction which he ultimately affirms as his 'world'. Unlike the chosen 'worlds' of the existentialists, the metaphysical 'world' which he has consciously entered is a 'world' which symbolically preserves those features of his original experience—gratuitousness, purposelessness, absurdity—which, as the self-consistent nihilist, he is resolved to appropriate and affirm. (This private metaphysical 'world' is, of course, identical with the private metaphysical system of *Der Einzige*.) Now, in Chapter X it was claimed that the artificial, freely chosen 'world' of the nihilist 'carries forward and reflects' the sterility, the vacuity, the meaninglessness, of his original, basic experience, and that it is this fidelity to his original and basic experience in virtue of which he might justly be said to have carried through the project from which the existentialists have all ultimately recoiled, namely, the project of existentially affirming and inwardly appropriating that nihilistic truth which for him, in common with the existentialists, was the one starting-point. However, it now transpires that Stirner's personal re-creation of this nihilistic truth is no more than a form of personal recreation. The question is clearly crucial: 'By thus stamping his self-affirmation as completely frivolous, has he jeopardized its existential quality as the self-affirmation of a truly consistent nihilist?'

Surely there can be no real doubt about the answer. If the creator, *as* 'creator', necessarily transcends his creation, then to create, in the manner of Stirner and the existentialists, a private metaphysical 'world' of whatever kind is necessarily to transcend the world one has chosen, to place oneself at a certain distance from it. The creator who fails to preserve this distance is finally absorbed by his creation; but on the other hand, to fail to retain any relationship to the world one professes to have chosen (to allow, so to speak, the distance to increase to infinity) is really to have ceased to

choose, to have ceased to appropriate and affirm a personal 'world' at all. The creative tension is absolutely necessary, and the figurative distance has to be maintained, if the equilibrium of creator-creation is to be preserved. Now, the dilemma of the existentialists is precisely this. The existentialist is threatened, on the one hand, with being absorbed by the Marxist or Fascist 'world' of his choice and becoming, accordingly, a Marxist or Fascist *tout pur*, forgetting that his Marxism or Fascism is always merely *his*, a personal and unjustifiable choice which he perpetually transcends; he reduces his distance from his chosen 'world' to zero, becomes identified with it, and finally becomes an apostate from existentialism, which had required him to remain conscious of the fragility and absurdity of his chosen 'world' and of his choice itself. On the other hand, he may reiterate the fragility and absurdity of his Marxism or Fascism so forcefully that it at last becomes impossible to consider him a Marxist or Fascist in any recognizable sense; in fact he is nothing; he has created nothing, neither a personal identity nor a world, because he has in fact refused to create anything. It certainly cannot be said that he has chosen to remain a nihilist, for, without having succeeded in escaping from nihilism, he remains *frozen in a posture of escape from nihilism*. Like his fellow, the apostate from existentialism, he has sought to repudiate the original nihilistic truth by which his ultimate choice was to be governed; only, unlike his fellow, he has failed to repudiate it; he is trapped.

Stirner, of course, represents the third and only remaining possibility. He is resolved to abide by the truth of his original nihilistic experience, by which his ultimate choice shall be governed; but he is also resolved that this shall be a *choice*, freely appropriated and decisively willed. He is not to repudiate nihilism, and he is not to be trapped by it, but instead to affirm it and to create a nihilistic 'world' as the only 'world' in which he can consistently live—or rather to re-create this as his 'world': the 'world' of his ultimate choice is the world of his original experience, and his act of creation is, as we have seen, an activity of recreation. However, this does not mean that the choice of nihilism is in any way a privileged or inevitable choice, for if it

were it would not be an existential 'choice'. *As* a 'choice', it remains completely personal and finally unjustifiable, and its author must always recognize that it is *merely* his choice. The figurative distance between the nihilistic creator and his nihilistic creation must be preserved if he is to be the 'creator' of the nihilistic world and not its victim. And this 'distance', this symbolic transcendence, has somehow to be realized, somehow to be formulated and asserted, if it is to be consciously preserved.

Now it is arguable that, in stamping his act of self-affirmation in *Der Einzige* as purely frivolous, Stirner is essentially attempting to realize and express this symbolic distance which must separate the nihilistic 'world' of his creation from himself as its creator, if he is to *be* its 'creator'. The image of the languid aesthete, savouring metaphysical ideas as he would savour the bouquet of a wine; the image of the reckless minstrel, filling the empty silence with the chance notes of a fleeting hour; the recurring image of the leisured and self-indulgent egoist, taking up his philosophy like a new and delightful toy, which he will cast aside the moment it begins to bore him: such images, it is arguable, are perfectly designed to formulate and assert the nihilist's inward and continuous detachment from his creation. And if this is indeed so, if Stirner is indeed aware, however dimly or intuitively, of the need to preserve a discreet and balanced detachment from the nihilistic 'world' on which his choice has finally settled, then it is hard to see how this necessary symbolic transcendence could have been more fittingly affirmed and rendered fluent. I have suggested that Stirner's attitude to the world-system, or the system-world, over which he presides as The Unique One, is essentially that of *the player*. Certainly, the concept of play summarizes much that is characteristic of Stirner's attitude to his own philosophy—his attitude to that personal 'world' in which he has chosen to live—and above all it manifests his disenchantment, with himself, with his own activity of philosophical creation, and with the ultimate product of that activity. For the nihilist, nothing is worth doing, nothing is worth being; and for the resolutely self-consistent nihilist, who actively wills and inwardly appropriates the truth of nihilism, it is equally true that to live as a nihilist in the nihilistic

world of one's choice is equally worthless. The self-consistent nihilist, like the existentialist, denies that it is possible ultimately to 'be' anything, in the sense of 'being' fully, finally, and justifiably, a Christian, Marxist, Fascist, or anything else whatsoever. Unlike the existentialist, the self-consistent nihilist—if he is Stirner's nihilistic egoist—settles, without guilt or recrimination, for a life in which he will accordingly do no more than 'act out' the nihilistic identity which he has chosen. His choice of a nihilistic identity, within a nihilistic world, is neither privileged nor inevitable; but given this basic choice, the quality of *frivolity* with which it has to be willed and lived *is* inevitable. Since, in the last analysis, nihilism is the refusal to take anything or anyone seriously, it must also be the refusal to take nihilism, and the nihilist himself, seriously. To 'be' a nihilist, Stirner has surely well illustrated, is essentially to play at being a nihilist.

CONCLUSION

Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum certainly cannot be ranked among the great metaphysical treatises of the nineteenth century. Unlike, say, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, Stirner's book is not rich in logical refinements and does not offer an abundance of metaphysical insights. Stirner's conceptual resources are limited and, although he employed them with great energy and concentration, he deliberately restricted his operations to a small, if crucial, area of metaphysical concern. Nevertheless, despite its obvious limitations and its relative lack of technical sophistication, *Der Einzige* surely remains a profoundly original and a uniquely disturbing book. After a hundred and twenty years Stirner's voice rings no less urgently, and the grim solution which he describes certainly retains its power to fascinate and to dismay. We can perhaps scarcely agree with James Huneker's judgment, that it is 'the most revolutionary book ever written'; but we are bound to agree with him that it is 'a veritable breviary of destruction, a striking and dangerous book . . . dangerous in every sense'.[1] Indeed, even to compare it to *The Prince* of Machiavelli, as James J. Martin has done,[2] is not so extravagant as it might at first sight seem: both books are remarkably outspoken, both have caused great scandal and offence, with brutal realism both have set out to publish what their authors have affirmed to be fundamental if deeply unpleasant truths.

'The issues which Stirner raised and Marx met', says Sidney Hook at the outset of his discussion of *The German Ideology*, 'have a definite relevance to the conflict of ideas and attitudes in the contemporary world in Europe and America today. Indeed we might even say that this is due to the fact that Stirner and Marx

[1] J. Huneker, *Egoists*, New York, 1909, p. 371.

[2] *The Ego and His Own*, 1963, Introduction by James J. Martin, p. xx.

are here discussing the fundamental problems of any possible system of ethics or public morality.'[1] Although Hook was writing in 1936, Sir Herbert Read comments: 'Now, after a second world war, which has brought all these fundamental problems into sharper focus, the relevance of Stirner's philosophy is all the more apparent.'[2] Our own period, like that in which Stirner was writing, is one in which traditional moral attitudes are being widely discarded and deeply held ideas are going into the melting-pot. Like him, we are living in an age of ideological upheaval. We are witnessing a widespread disillusion, not only with the received codes of personal ethics, but also with the value of rational procedures in the settlement of moral and social disputes. The ethical assumptions of democratic society, which are based in turn on an optimistic rationalism, are being sharply questioned by some of the most articulate members of democratic society, particularly by its younger members. The value of open rational discussion, for example, of free speech, which is a cardinal principle of liberal humanism, was rancorously impugned by Stirner and is today being vehemently questioned by many groups which may be widely different in their character and aims but which share a growing disregard of the conventions of liberal humanism. If liberal humanism is on the defensive, this is because many of its basic principles seem increasingly irrelevant to larger numbers of people. To such people the only realistic social programmes are those directed towards a seizure of *power*. The critics of liberal humanism speak with many voices, but one of these is the recognizable voice of Stirner, recording his deep disgust with the hollow abstractions of public morality and cynically affirming his intention to pursue his own private interests without regard to useless and irrelevant moral principles. In some respects Stirner may well be a portentous figure for our own time.

However, Stirner is also very identifiably a figure of his own time. Whatever *Der Einzige* may have to say to the intellectual rebels of

[1] Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, ch. 5, introduction.

[2] See the essay entitled 'Max Stirner' in the collection of essays by Sir Herbert Read, *The Tenth Muse*, London, 1957.

the twentieth century, in mood, style, and tone the book is very much a product of the nineteenth century. As a piece of literature, it clearly belongs with the nihilistic literature of the nineteenth century; the notes it strikes are clearly part of that despairing and satanic chord we find in so many nineteenth century novelists, dramatists, poets, and philosophers, from de Sade at the beginning of the century, through Leopardi, Poe, Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, Ibsen, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Swinburne, and Rimbaud, to Huysmans, Strindberg, and Nietzsche at its end. R. M. Adams has shown[1] how the 'decadence' of so many nineteenth century writers, their obsession with the destructive (including the self-destructive), the sinister, and the morally perverted, was one aspect of their intense preoccupation with the experience of Nothingness, of the emptiness and meaninglessness of all things. Of course, to most of these writers the name of Stirner would have been unknown;[2] of course, few of these writers were 'nihilists' in any strict, philosophical sense; but the experience which they confronted and with which they sought to come to terms, this experience of a gaping void at the heart of existence, shedding the spiritual darkness by which their writings were infected, was essentially the nihilistic experience from which Stirner started and within which he resolutely chose to make his abode.

The nineteenth century produced another, and very different, kind of 'nihilistic' literature, the literature written in vindication of the activities of those notorious political terrorists—Russian, French, and German—to whom the term 'nihilists' is popularly applied. It is to this nihilistic terrorism, both of the Left and of the Right, that Camus attempts to relate the philosophy of *Der Einzige*. Just as the dark, nihilistic elements which broke surface in the writings of the Baudelaires, the Rimbauds, and the Strindbergs have now come to full measure in the European literature of the present day (for example, in the work of Genet and Beckett), haunting us now in broad daylight, so—as we know to our cost—

[1] See R. M. Adams, *Nil: Episodes in the Literary Conquest of Void during the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1966.

[2] However, Ibsen, certainly, and Mallarmé, almost certainly, were familiar with the ideas of *Der Einzige*.

the nihilism of the nineteenth century terrorists has reached its full measure in the wholesale political terror witnessed by the present century. However, as I have argued earlier,[1] it is excessively fanciful to relate the purely metaphysical, inward-looking nihilism of Stirner to the only too fiercely active, socially revolutionary nihilism of the Nechayevs and the Bakunins. And it is if possible more fanciful still to relate the egoistic nihilism of Stirner to the wholly different kind of nihilism undoubtedly latent in the ideology of Nazism, as Robert Payne does in attempting to show 'the complete identity between nihilist and Nazi judgments on humanity'.[2] (Payne even compares a passage from *Der Einzige*[3] to a passage from a letter of Seyss-Inquart's subsequently produced in evidence at the Nuremberg trials.) Stirner is the least social, the least political of writers; *Der Einzige* is the most purely personal, the most individualistic of books. The collectivism, more specifically the nationalism and racialism, of the Nazis would have been utterly abhorrent to Stirner, not of course on moral grounds but because of the utter opposition between The Unique One and national, racial, or other kinds of collectivity. The Nazis, like the nihilistic terrorists of the nineteenth century with their burning group loyalties and their readiness to sacrifice their lives to the cause for which they fought, would have seemed to The Unique One the very type and model of self-alienation, for if there is one human posture which to The Unique One symbolizes the most complete personal degradation it is the posture of *the fanatic*. In the nihilistic terrorists, in the Nazis, and in The Unique One the same seeds of dissolution may have been working; the finished philosophy of *Der Einzige*, however, (although, like other philosophies of disillusion, it may incidentally give rise to serious social consequences) is in no way a programme for active social revolutionaries, but essentially a poem of metaphysical disenchantment for the cynical and introspective solitary; and thus Stirner's affinities are essentially with the Baudelaires and the Rimbauds rather than with the Nechayevs and the Seyss-Inquarts.

[1] Chapter VI. [2] R. Payne, *Zero*, London and New York, 1951, pp. 198–9.
[3] D.E., p. 340. The passage in question contains the statement: 'I can kill men, not torture them.'

By no means all commentators have identified Stirner with the dark, the violent, or the extravagant in ethics and philosophy. Some, like Berdyaev, while acknowledging the ultimate perversity of Stirner's philosophy, have claimed to discern certain fundamental moral truths mirrored therein, perhaps truths about the absolute value of personality or the integration of character needed to produce true selfhood. 'In Max Stirner,' says Berdyaev, 'in spite of the falsity of his philosophy, true personalism is to be found, but in a distorted form.'[1] And Sir Herbert Read, comparing Stirner's views with those of Jung and Fromm, states that 'Stirner's doctrine is, in fact, a plea for the integration of the personality, and on that basis the charge of "selfishness" becomes somewhat naive'.[2] Such attempts to 'redeem' Stirner, however, by finding in him themes which, in other hands and in another context, could bear a noble and lofty interpretation, are almost bound to fail. Any plausibility they have is gained only by totally disregarding Stirner's central and reiterated doctrines, and even this plausibility disappears when the reputedly noble themes are more closely inspected. I have shown, for example, that, far from placing an absolute value on personality, there is nothing—not even his own personality—on which Stirner's nihilistic egoist places absolute value, for the provisional values which The Unique One arbitrarily adopts are all consciously relative, studiously contingent, and in the philosophy of radical finitude which Stirner describes it is precisely 'absolute values' which excite The Unique One's most implacable hostility. I have also shown that, far from seeking an ideal integration of personality, Stirner's nihilistic egoist, who rejects all ideals, specifically rejects the ideal of integrated personality: The Unique One's egoism is a nihilistic egoism precisely because his choice of an identity is the choice of an identity in continual disintegration, in constant 'flux and dissolution'. Every attempt to extract a set of beneficent moral principles from *Der Einzige* is virtually bound to be stultified in advance, since it is one of Stirner's central and reiterated doctrines, which *Der Einzige* labours so hard to annotate, that all moral principles are equally meaningless and equally impertinent.

[1] N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, London, 1943, p. 34. [2] Read, loc. cit.

To seek in Stirner a positive moral or social philosophy, then, is to seek in vain: the philosophy of The Unique One is profoundly indifferent to moral and social 'issues'. This is not to say that such an amoral and asocial philosophy does not have serious and far-reaching moral and social implications. A society in which Stirner's self-centred indifferentism became a generally held attitude would be a society on the brink of dissolution. A liberal democratic society whose educated members were overcome by this spirit of cynical disillusion, pursuing their private interests without public conscience or social responsibility, would quickly fall prey to the many declared enemies of democratic liberalism—even although these private egoists might have no more sympathy with the enemies of liberalism than they had respect for the values of liberalism itself (just as Stirner, contemptuous of liberal humanism, was equally contemptuous of the Young Hegelian alternatives proposed by the social revolutionaries of his own society and age). Now, it is arguable that, in so far as the lessons of *Der Einzige* have any relevance to our own social problems, it will be a negative relevance of this kind. Stirner's nihilistic egoism is not reflected in the many organized movements, with definite revolutionary objectives, which are consciously seeking to overthrow liberal democratic society as we know it. It is rather reflected, more subtly, in the moods of self-centred indifference, of cynical disillusion and narrow self-seeking, experienced by many uncommitted members of our society, including some of the most honest and thoughtful. It is reflected, that is to say, not in the activities of the politically committed, concerned about social issues and the future of society, but in the minds of private individuals interested only in themselves and their own futures.

We are here dealing with a moral phenomenon which, I have earlier argued, is grounded in a basic metaphysical experience. If the moral phenomenon—the rootlessness, irresponsibility, destructiveness, and self-seeking of so many people, their lack of stable loyalties or deep convictions—is manifested with the most disturbing clarity in the personal life of private individuals, this is perhaps because it is grounded in a metaphysical experience which is essentially private, essentially subjective to the solitary and

disengaged consciousness. The experience in question is an experience of the apparent worthlessness of everything, of general futility, of profound and all-consuming meaninglessness: it is the experience which, under the somewhat tendentious names of 'anguish' and 'dread', has in our times attracted the special attention of existentialist philosophers in particular. In the present book I have tried to locate and define the main resemblances between existentialist philosophy and the philosophy of *Der Einzige*, for, as Sir Herbert Read puts it, 'Stirner is one of the most existentialist of all past philosophers',[1] and in doing so I have suggested that the point of departure for both Stirner and the existentialists is this crucial experience of the meaninglessness of all things. The experience is referred to by many names. Let us call it the experience of *estrangement*. I have argued that, whereas the existentialists seek by one means or another to overcome this condition of estrangement, it is Stirner's explicit resolve to accept this condition, to affirm himself within the dimension of estrangement as his freely chosen habitation and province. Readers may not accept that the egoistic solution projected by Stirner is realizable on the terms proposed by him (or desirable, if it is realizable); but it must surely be acknowledged that his descriptions of rootlessness, solitude, destructiveness, and inner sterility—in the figure of The Unique One—represent a contribution to the phenomenology of estrangement which is of the most immediate relevance to anyone concerned to understand and evaluate that perilous condition.

I should want to claim that this is the chief source of Stirner's contemporary and permanent relevance. In *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* he has conveyed to us a record of what it is like to live in the dark, barren regions of estrangement, in the waste land where nothing has meaning, purpose, or value. His decision to live in this waste land has been a deliberate and conscious one, made in full awareness of its implications for his personal existence, and as such it ought to be of searching interest to all those who from different standpoints are concerned to explore the implications of human estrangement. To the religious believer, for example, Stirner's

[1] Read, *Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism*, London, 1950, p. 24.

account ought to shed a grim light on the nature and implications of 'sin', conceived as estrangement from God, from the ground and goal of our being; for in his proud self-sufficiency The Unique One is the archetype of the sinful individual, basing his life of egoistic self-assertion on a conscious refusal of present grace or future salvation. From one point of view we may consider Stirner's philosophy as beginning and ending with the rejection of God. The posture of The Unique One, as we have seen, is the posture of the total atheist. It is the posture of the man who rejects God totally, who not merely denies the existence of God on intellectual grounds but utterly rejects him with his whole being, as an existential act, rejecting at the same time every concept to which vestiges of 'the divine', 'the holy', 'the sacred', still cling. According to the Christian it is an *acceptance* of just such a full and final kind which is required by true faith. And according to Stirner no less than such a full and final *refusal* is demanded by true atheism. The theological ferment of the present time, in which thinkers like Van Buren, seeking a truly secular Christianity, are endeavouring to effect a fruitful synthesis between traditional Christian belief and a deepened, more perceptive humanism, would be dismissed by Stirner (as he dismissed the programmes of theological reconstruction of his own day) as ultimately irrelevant. To choose oneself as an atheist of course involves repudiating the dogmas of religion, but it involves much more than this: the truly radical atheist, Stirner tells us, will refuse, in a free and unjustifiable act of choice, everything which religion claims to offer—whether it is the Christian religion offering 'salvation' or 'eternal life', or a humanistic religion offering 'fulfilment' or 'universal brotherhood'. For Stirner, to live as a truly radical atheist is to live the life of the nihilistic egoist, to live in deliberately chosen estrangement from God and man. In The Unique One Stirner has attempted to describe someone who has unflinchingly chosen to live in this desolate dimension of total estrangement. As the most complete and circumstantial account of what this choice involves, therefore, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* surely has a unique and lasting importance for everyone concerned about man's prospects of spiritual gain—or of utter spiritual loss.

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INDEX

Anarchism, xi, 102, 126–44.
Art and Religion', 50, 53–4, 60.

Bakunin, M., 105, 128, 141.
Bauer, B., 8, 9–10, 11, 16, 28, 33–4, 37, 40–1, 48–9, 53, 58, 106, 108, 110, 193–6.
Bauer, E., 8, 37, 43, 83.
Berliner Monatsschrift, 8, 10, 50.
Buber, M., 164–5, 204.
Buhl, L., 8, 9, 16, 32.
Bultmann, R., 201–2.
Butz, A. C. K., 6.

Camus, A., 168–70, 313.
Communism, 80, 84–5, 101–25 *passim*; *see also* Marx, Socialism, etc.
Criticism, 33–4, 40–1, 43, 58, 75–7, 106, 193–4, 195–6; *see also* Bauer, B.

Dähnhardt, M., 9, 14.
Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum, 11–13, 61–98, and *passim*.

Engels, F., 7, 8, 12, 32, 94, 97, 102–22, 141.
Essence of Christianity, The, 29–30, 42, 53; *see also* Feuerbach.
Existentialism, viii–ix, xii, 102, 122–5, 162–88, 217, 221–5, 226–51; *see also* Camus, Heidegger, Sartre, etc.

'False Principle of our Education, The', 50, 51–2, 60.
Feuerbach, L., 7, 10, 12, 26, 28, 29–30, 41–2, 53, 69, 71, 93–4, 95, 103, 105–6, 108, 118, 193, 194–5, 196–7, 198.
Fichte, J. G., 21.
Fischer, K., 12, 96–7.
'Freien, die', 7–9, 11, 34–5, 36; *see also* Bauer, B. and E., Buhl, etc.

Gabler, G., 26, 27, 35.
German Ideology, The, 12, 103–25.

Hegel, G. W. F., 4, 22–4, 39–40, 48–9, 72, 90, 110, 172, 192–3, 199.
Hegelianism, 24–30, 31, 33, 49, 199; *see also* Young Hegelians.
Heidegger, M., 162–88 *passim*, 221, 227, 230–1, 236–7.
Hess, M., 7, 12, 32, 37, 94, 95–6, 103.
Hippel's, 8, 9, 33, 36, 102; *see also* 'Freien, die'.
Holy Family, The, 56, 104, 106, 108, 117, 118, 119.

Jaspers, K., 216n.
Julius, G., 8, 108.

Kant, I., 215.
Kierkegaard, S., 162–7, 226, 230, 235.
Kropotkin, P., 128.

Lange, F.A., 149, 301.
Left Hegelians, *see* Young Hegelians.
Leipziger Allgemeine Zeitung, 8, 10, 30, 38, 47–8, 50.
Liberalism, political, 54–6, 73–4.
Life of Jesus, The, 27, 28–9.
'Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy', 104–5, 141.

Mackay, J. H., 3, 130, 141, 147, 149.
Marheineke, P. K., 4, 26, 35, 48.
Marx, K., xii, 7, 8, 12, 32, 94, 97–8, 102–25, 197.
Michelet, K. L., 25, 35.
Mystères de Paris, Les, 50, 56–8, 60.

Nazism, 314.

Nietzsche, F. W., 142–4, 145–61, 169, 217–18, 226, 230, 235, 238–9.

'On School Rules', 5n., 35.

'Philosophical Reactionaries, The', 96–7.
Proudhon, P.-J., 32, 37, 43, 71, 84, 105, 117, 127, 141.

Reply of a member of the Berlin community, 49.
Rheinische Zeitung, 10, 30, 32, 38, 46, 50, 102.
Robinson, J. A. T., 202–3, 204, 211.
Rosenkranz, J. K. F., 25, 47, 55.
Ruge, A., 9, 10, 12, 32, 36, 42–3, 55, 108.

Sade, Marquis de, 168, 255.
Sartre, J.-P., xii, 125, 162–88 *passim*, 221–36 *passim*, 279–83, 299–300.
Say, J.-B., 13.
Schelling, F. W., 21, 31.
Schleiermacher, F. D. E., 4, 24, 35.
Smith, A., 13.
Socialism, 32–3, 42–3, 74–5, 94, 95–6, 97, 101–25 *passim*.
'Some Provisional Ideas concerning the State Founded on Love', 50, 54–6, 60.
Stein, Baron von, 54.
'Stirner's Reviewers: A Rejoinder to Feuerbach, Szeliga, and Hess', 94–6.
Strauss, D. F., 26, 27, 28–9, 193.
Sue, E., 50, 56–8.
Szeliga, 12, 58, 93, 94–5.

Theses on Feuerbach, 104, 116, 119.
Tillich, P., 200–1, 227.
Trendelenburg, A., 5, 35.
Trumpet of the Last Judgment against Hegel, The, 48–50.
Tucker, B. R., 128–30.

Young Hegelians, xii, 10, 27–8, 32–3, 49, 53–4, 58–60, 193–5; *see also* Bauer, B. and E., Feuerbach, Ruge, Strauss, etc.